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# The Leftist-Sadrist Alliance

## Social Movements and Strategic Politics in Iraq

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# Signed Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where states otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

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Date: 27 October 2019

## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the formation of the leftist-Sadrist alliance that won Iraq's May 2018 national elections. It argues that this cross-ideological social movement coalition was neither a case of two groups always primed for cooperation because of their shared social bases and political perspectives; nor was it merely an instrumental coalition negotiated between a narrow range of political elites. Rather, the alliance points to transformations in both the social and ideological structures of the two movements, and in the social contexts in which their strategic politics has been formed. This thesis uses a practice-based approach inspired by the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu to unpack these transformations. It uncovers forms of social struggle on cultural terrain, popular politics, intra-movement cleavages and systemic social crises and their effects in transforming the political strategies of these social movements. The outcome of this research is a new understanding of Iraq's secular-leftist politics and the Sadr movement. These groups are shown to be both more ideologically heterogeneous, and their strategic politics more internally contested, than has hitherto been recognised.

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# INTRODUCTION

The victory of the Shiʿi Islamist Sadr movement[1] in Iraq's May 2018 parliamentary elections stunned the Iraqi political establishment and outside observers alike.[2] More surprising still, the winning coalition, Marching Forward (Sairoun), was constituted by an alliance between the Sadrists and an assortment of secular and leftist political groups amongst whom the previously marginal Iraqi Communist Party (al-Hizb al-Shuyu'i al-'Iraqi, ICP) was the most prominent. This unlikely electoral alliance emerged out of a broader cross-ideological social movement coalition which took shape in 2015 as protests swept from the south to Baghdad and hundreds of thousands took to the streets demanding fundamental political change.

Despite the Sadrists' leading role, this social movement appeared to eschew previously dominant forms of identity-based politics and to abandon Shiʿi religious and Sadrist symbols and ideology.[3] Instead, the Sadrists adopted the more 'moderate' politics of their newfound leftist allies. Thus, the coalition coalesced around a demand for ending the '*muḥāṣaṣa tā'ifiyya,'* or sectarian quota system, which had entrenched sectarian politics and party factionalism in Iraq's governing institutions. Protesters also called for the appointment of so-called 'technocratic' alternatives not beholden to the sectarian or party blocs.[4]

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[1] *al-tayyār al-ṣadrī* (the Sadrist trend or current) is a contested space of competing groups and movements that claim affiliation to the religious movement of Ayatollah Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr of the 1990s. This thesis focuses on the most powerful group within this trend led by Sadeq al-Sadr's son, Muqtada al-Sadr, and uses the term 'Sadr movement' as synonymous with this group. Nevertheless, dimensions of cooperation and competition within this group, and between this group and other groups within the broader Sadrist constellation, are also an important element of the analysis. 'Sadrist trend' or 'current' are used here to denote this wider and more amorphous category.

[2] Kirk Sowell wrote: 'Initial results from Iraq's May 12 parliamentary elections, in which a coalition backed by Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr came in first place, sent a shockwave through the establishment and reset expectations regarding the formation of the next government.' Kirk H. Sowell, 'Understanding Sadr's Victory,' *The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* May 17, 2018. http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/76387

[3] Faleh 'Abd al-Jabar described the protests as representing a shift 'from identity politics to issue politics.' See, Faleh A. Jabar, 'The Iraqi Protest Movement: From Identity Politics to Issue Politics,' *LSE Middle East Centre (MEC) Paper Series*, June 22, 2018. https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88294/1/Faleh_Iraqi%20Protest%20Movement_Published_English.pdf

[4] For a discussion on the functioning of the *muḥāṣaṣa tā'ifiyya*, see Toby Dodge, 'Tracing the Rise of Sectarianism in Iraq after 2003,' memo presented at *The Comparative Politics of Sub-state Identity in the Middle East LSE MEC workshop,* June 29, 2018. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/09/13/tracing-

Sairoun, formed as an electoral alliance in 2018, claimed to represent the 2015 protest movement. The alliance's programme linked protesters' demand for ending the *muḥāṣaṣa tā'ifiyya* to the broader conceptual framework of a 'civil state' (*al-dawla al-madaniyya*). The political rhetoric of the Sadr movement's leader, the cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, seemed to range more widely still, critiquing the entire edifice of political Islamism in Iraq. He even stated during a television interview prior to the 2018 elections: 'I'll say this despite the *'amāma* [turban] on my head, we tried the Islamists and they failed miserably, it's time to try independent technocrats.'[5]

On the surface, this seemed a radical alteration for one of the Arab world's most powerful Islamist movements that was previously known for its sectarian violence, messianic Shiʿi religiosity,[6] puritanical social conservatism and ties to Iranian paramilitary networks. This apparent transformation renewed both scholarly and media interest in the Sadr movement's ideological orientations, political strategies and relationships with other Iraqi groups and regional actors. One analyst wrote that;

> Sadr's political makeover amounts to a groundbreaking and encouraging transformation [which] sets an example for other leaders and political organizations interested in exiting the confining boxes of sectarianism and patronage and mobilizing broader, more fluid and inclusive idea- or policy-based movements.[7]

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the-rise-of-sectarianism-in-iraq-after-2003/ and, on its transition from a sectarian to a party-based logic, see Fanar Haddad, 'The Waning Relevance of the Sunni-Shia Divide,' *The Century Foundation,* April 10, 2019. https://tcf.org/content/report/waning-relevance-sunni-shia-divide/?agreed=1

[5] Muqtada al-Sadr, 21 Nov, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3c7WAefoUw0&feature=youtu.be

[6] This thesis uses 'messianic' rather than the closely-related term 'millenarian' to describe certain religious features of the Sadr movement. In this view, the return of the Hidden Imam (Muhammad al-Mahdi) functions as an eschatological redeemer. Sadrist messianism reflects a particular mode of prophetic religious leadership which claims direct access to metaphysical reality through a connection to the Mahdi, but also in millenarian practices that construe religious actions as paving the way for this return. A concept of messianic religiosity is developed further in this thesis, particularly in chapters two and three. For more on messianic religious movements in Islam, see Ali S. Asani, 'Religious Movements with Islamic Origins,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Religions,* ed. Mark Juergensmeyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[7] Thanassis Cambanis, 'Can Militant Cleric Moqtada al-Sadr Reform Iraq?' *The Century Foundation,* May 1, 2018. https://tcf.org/content/report/can-militant-cleric-moqtada-al-sadr-reform-iraq/ Cambanis also argued that Sadr's alliance with the ICP represented his 'full embrace of nationalism and secularism' and that Sadrist protesters were now calling for 'the creation of a secular state.' This thesis will show how such claims obscure more complex realities. See Thanassis Cambanis, 'Social Engineering in Samarra An Iraqi Shia Militia Experiments with Nationalism in a Sunni City,' *The Century Foundation,* May 2, 2019, 1. https://production-tcf.imgix.net/app/uploads/2019/04/30131807/Cambanis_Samarra_FinalPDF.pdf

Other observers argued Muqtada was now 'championing… secular-oriented politics,'[8] and was 'more aligned with Western attempts to reign in Iranian influence,' and was even 'anti-Iranian.'[9] These claims seemed to envisage that the Sadr movement had undertaken a thoroughgoing reorientation in its ideology and politics and was now set to play a key role in reforming Iraq's broken political system.

By contrast, others rejected or downplayed this notion of Sadrist transformation and offered various alternative explanations for the movement's shifting political behaviour. Some argued these changes were merely cosmetic and not rooted in ideology or policy-based politics but in a tactical game of 'power politics'.[10] Others homed in on Muqtada's supposedly erratic and unpredictable psychology which, it was suggested, rendered futile any attempt to try and rationalise Sadrist politics. As one analyst wrote, Muqtada 'lurches haphazardly to and fro, and his movements might as well be described as policy by divination.'[11] Doubt was also cast on the substantiveness of the Sadr movement's supposed antagonism with Iran and certainly its potential amenability to US or Western interests in Iraq.[12] Between all these contradictory interpretations, a general sense of confusion and ambiguity surrounded the Sadrists and the prominent role the movement seemed likely to play, for better or worse, in shaping Iraq's future.

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[8] Mehiyar Kathem, 'Iraq's New Statesman,' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* May 3, 2018. https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/05/03/iraq-s-new-statesman-pub-76244

[9] Michael D. Sullivan, 'I Fought Against Muqtada al-Sadr. Now He's Iraq's Best Hope,' *Foreign Policy,* June 18, 2018. https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/18/i-fought-against-muqtada-al-sadr-now-hes-iraqs-best-hope/
Some have always insisted the Sadr movement was always both anti-sectarian and anti-Iranian in its core ideology, see Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada: Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revival, and the Struggle for Iraq* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 166-167. This position, which is difficult to sustain, is explored in more detail in chapter three.

[10] Kirk H. Sowell, 'Iraq's Fake Populism and Anti-sectarianism,' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 9, 2016. http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/63777 ; and Michael Weiss, 'Moqtada al-Sadr, the Donald Trump of Iraq,' *Daily Beast*, April 13, 2017. https://www.thedailybeast.com/moqtada-al-sadr-the-donald-trump-of-iraq

[11] Nibras Kazimi, 'Iraq: What was that all about?' *Talisman Gate,* May 10, 2016, https://talisman-gate.com/2016/05/10/iraq-what-was-that-all-about/

[12] Phillip Smyth, 'Beware of Muqtada al-Sadr,' *The Washington Institute,* October 19, 2016. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/beware-of-muqtada-al-sadr ; and, from the opposing political perspective, Elijah J. Magnier, 'Moqtada al-Sadr and Iran: A Long Love-Hate Relationship,' *The Centre for Research on Globalization,* September 15, 2019. https://www.globalresearch.ca/moqtada-al-sadr-iran-love-hate-relationship/5689495

Sairoun's electoral victory also prompted fresh interest in the other side of the alliance, i.e. Iraq's secular-leftist and liberal forces who most had discounted as too weak and marginalised to play a significant political role.[13] The ICP, in particular, had been presented as a spent political force, condemned to irrelevance by its participation in the post-2003 US-sponsored Iraqi Governing Council (IGC).[14] It was also argued that broader strata of Iraqi secular civil society also possessed few resources that would allow them to buy into Iraq's clientelist political economy that leveraged coercive violence, material patronage and sectarian and ethnic identities.[15] Moreover, the ideological orientation of these forces was typically understood as staunchly secularist and united around opposition to the governing Islamist elites and their non-state paramilitary allies. The ICP, along with secular-liberal allies, had attempted to isolate the Sadr movement in particular from the post-2003 political process.[16] The two sets of actors have thus been conceived as either mutually indifferent or implacably hostile and engaged in a zero-sum struggle for Iraq's soul.[17]

Given this prevailing picture, it was puzzling that such marginal actors should emerge as the political allies of one of Iraq's most powerful and reviled Islamist groups. Even more perplexing was how they seemingly transformed, through this alliance, the Sadrists' political orientation, despite the radical imbalance in the relative power between the two movements. On the other hand, many secular activists and political groups fiercely resisted cooperation with the Sadr movement, causing critical splits within Iraq's 'civil trend' (*al-tayyār al-madanī*).[18] This was a nascent social

[13] Tareq Y. Ismael charted the organisations descent into what he regarded as political irrelevancy post-2003. See Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
[14] Ismael, *The Rise,* 301-304.
[15] For this reason, Toby Dodge writes: 'Iraqi society's capacity to mobilise in support of its democracy must be in question,' see, Toby Dodge, 'State and society in Iraq ten years after regime change: the rise of a new authoritarianism,' *International Affairs* 89, no. 2 (2013): 254.
[16] Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War Losing the Peace* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 167.
[17] For example, see Amatzia Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2014), 348.
[18] In Iraqi public discourse *al-tayyār al-madanī* (civil trend) denotes a broad movement of secular and leftist actors in culture and politics. Its most powerful political entity is the Iraqi Communist Party (al-Hizb al-Shuyu'i al-'Iraqi, ICP). However, the ICP is not coterminous with the civil trend and the definition of the latter movement in terms of its identity, boundaries, politicisation and strategies has been subject to continuous intra-movement contestation

movement that emerged in 2009 to advance a secularist political vision for Iraq.[19] This raised further questions as to why certain secular and leftist individuals and groups were willing to jeopardise this newly-arrived and hard-fought secularist social movement, and even to abandon political allies and even personal friendships, in pursuit of a political alliance with the Sadrists.

These are the central puzzles which my thesis seeks to address. Put simply, I want to answer the question of how the radical shifts in the strategic politics of these movements can be understood and the impacts this coalition had on Iraqi politics. The forms of explanation that have emerged so far can be organised into two categories. First, that the alliance did not require substantive transformations by either movement, since the two groups were always primed for cooperation because of their shared cultural and political perspectives and social bases.[20] And second, that the leftist-Sadrist alliance was merely an 'instrumental coalition,'[21] or a tactical political bargain, coordinated between a narrow elite, that neither relied on, nor generated, broader perspectives or identities that were shared within, and between, the two movements.[22] By contrast, I will argue that the alliance can only be understood as a phenomenon of transformation in both the social and ideological structures of the two movements and in the broader social context in which their strategic politics was formed.

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[19] This term, and the social movement it denotes, are defined more fully in chapter one.

[20] Eric Davis, for example, argued that there was nothing surprising about the leftist-Sadrist alliance. Responding to a media article on the topic, Davis noted 'it's not odd at all that a religious group – Sadrists - allies with Iraqi Communist Party. The "Red Mullahs" in al-Najaf in 1940s were allied with ICP. Both Sadrists & ICP [are] strong Iraqi nationalist parties & vehemently anti-sectarian.' Davis is presumably referring here to Mullah Sharif 'Uthman who was elected to the ICP Central Committee in at the First Congress. However, as Ismael outlines, '…with Fahd's arrest in 1947, Sharif 'Uthman abandoned all the work he had done and resigned, saying that Fahd had been the source of his loyalty and inspiration.' Thus, it does not seem 'Uthman is strong evidence of a wider pattern of close ties or cooperation between the Shiʿi ʿulamaʾ and the ICP, see Ismael, *The Rise,* 63. Davis's response is representative of a broad section of opinion from scholars and experts who did not consider the left-Sadrist alliance a remarkable or transformatory phenomenon. See, Eric Davis, February 11, 2018. https://twitter.com/NewMidEast/status/962753138657722368 ; see also Rasha al-Aqeedi on 'What to Expect from the New Iraqi Government' on *The Lawfare Podcast*, November 20, 2018. https://www.lawfareblog.com/lawfare-podcast-what-expect-new-iraqi-government

[21] Damian Doyle, 'Pulling and Gouging: The Sadrist Line's Adaptable and Evolving Repertoire of Contention,' in *New Opposition in the Middle East,* Dara Conduit & Shahram Akbarzadeh eds. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 48.

[22] Sowell, 'Iraq's Fake Populism'; and Weiss, 'Moqtada al-Sadr'.

Thus, I uncover the alliance's deeper roots, both historically and in the sense of its penetration into deeper social structures and strata of Iraqi society outside the narrow domain of formal elite politics. Here, an overlooked pattern of secular-Sadrist interactions on cultural and ideological terrain set the scene in crucial ways for later forms of strategic political cooperation. These processes produced new cross-ideological social ties, and new cultural and political perspectives that transformed how movement actors conceived themselves as political subjects. What emerged was a greater degree of social embeddedness between Iraq's secular intelligentsia and certain cultural and intellectual strata of the Sadr movement. These were the social foundations that opened new strategic possibilities for cross-ideological coalition politics.

However, a further effect of these cross-movement interactions was an exacerbation of intra-movement cleavages. Endogenous dynamics of social struggle coalesced around the new political ideas and postures outlined above and their distinct claims on power and legitimation. In the Sadr movement, this internal contestation formed around the divergent perspectives of its political and intellectual activist strata, and its previously dominant clerical class. It was, at its root, therefore, a conflict over competing forms of power and authority that belonged to distinct spheres of social action (intellectual, political and religious). The Iraqi civil trend was also characterised by intra-movement conflicts, in this case over politicisation of the movement, between the centre and periphery (Baghdad-Basra) and over leadership and competing strategic visions. These transverse cleavages altered the strategic landscape for individuals and groups within these movements. It made them both more vulnerable to the tactical actions of external parties, and more open to the possibility of cross-ideological cooperation.

These transverse movement cleavages also interacted with systemic social crises that intensified in 2014-2015. This period saw the convergence of the Islamic State crisis with new forms of popular politics in south and central Iraq, that radically challenged the legitimacy of the political system. One effect of these crises was an erosion of cohesion within elite networks as political actors, and particularly the Sadr movement, sought out new sources of legitimation. This opened up strategic opportunities for previously marginalised sections of civil society to enter into politics.

The Iraqi left and the civil trend were at the heart of this process, positioning themselves as mediators and gatekeepers between emerging forms of bottom-up politics and the political class. This presented an opportunity to fashion strategies that sought to penetrate the political field. However, such strategies also had to navigate a vanishingly narrow pathway between resistance to this system and collusion with its fundamental logic of power.

My thesis, then, is a political sociology of two social movements in Iraq and their mutual interactions. It seeks to understand their shifting political strategies, both under the *longue durée* as a consequence of less tangible and slow-moving historical forces and processes, and under the more fluid conditions thrown up by transverse movement cleavages and systemic social crises. The common thread running throughout is the question of social movement strategy and how to think about the 'action situation' in which strategic decisions are made and action unfolds. I apply a practice-based approach influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu and French political scientist Michel Dobry to describe this social situation and its effects on social movement politics.[23]

A practice-based approach is fundamentally interested in social action, as opposed to cognitive aspects of human subjectivity. It focuses on how actors create structures and meaning-giving contexts through their engagement in the social world. Bourdieu's theory of practice, which sees action as emerging from the interaction of his core concepts – habitus; social capitals; and field – focuses on this recursive relationship between structure and action. I argue that this approach can help explicate the strategic politics of social movements by addressing three key aspects of this phenomenon: first, the historical formation of political subjects via habitus and their socially embedded strategic agency; second, the social terrain (fields) on which movements grow, and in which they remain engaged, and its structuring effects on

[23] David Swartz, *Culture & Power: The Sociology of Pierre* Bourdieu (London: University of Chicago Press, 2007); for application of Bourdieu to social movement research, see Nick Crossley, *Making Sense of Social Movements* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002); Michel Dobry, 'Critical Processes and Political Fluidity: a Theoretical Appraisal,' *International Political Anthropology* 2, no. 1 (2009): 1-16; this conceptual and theoretical approach was also influenced by discussion in the introduction to John Chalcraft, *Popular Politics and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), and Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 118-127.

practices; and third, the diverse resources (forms of social capital) of which movements are composed and which structure relations between movement actors and their strategic orientations and behaviours. The picture of social movements that emerges through this lens is of internally contested and ideologically heterogeneous socio-cultural entities. Thus, rather than presenting the civil trend and the Sadr movement in terms of a monological activism, this thesis will elucidate the different and overlapping 'social games' in which movement actors are engaged, and how these translate into a plurality of strategic perspectives and practices.

Bourdieu's theory of practice has rarely been applied to the study of social movements as it has more commonly been viewed as oriented toward explaining the reproduction of relatively stable social systems over time. Social crises, by contrast, are critical episodes in which the more durable rules that govern social behaviour are disrupted. Dobry has described such crises in terms of a desectorisation of social reality. This is a fluid socio-structural state wherein movement actors mobilise social stakes (forms of power, authority and legitimation) that are normally contained to particular sectors of the social world into new contexts. This practice throws existing logics and rules that structure social relations into a more highly contested state. Previously rigid and embedded structures thus come to be characterised by greater contingency and permeability to tactical actions. Social crises, in this view, generate new structural conditions characterised by their relative autonomy from the more enduring and slow-moving structures of social fields.[24]

Combining these perspectives – Bourdieu and Dobry – offers a view on strategic politics and strategic agency that addresses both the historical and social embeddedness of agents and the ways in which they act rationally and strategically within, and thus also shape, critical episodes. Analyses of Iraq's post-2003 politics have rarely approached social movements as strategic and rational phenomena of this sort. Rather, a distorted image has emerged which casts forms of popular politics in Iraq as chaotic and emotion-driven expressions of primordial attachments, social dysfunction and, particularly in the Sadrists case, elite manipulation. My thesis seeks

[24] Dobry, 'Critical processes,' 5.

to show Iraqi socio-political dynamics in a new light by uncovering the creative strategies by which social movement actors have sought to resist political domination. In doing so, I also argue for bringing Iraq back within broader comparative literatures in the social sciences from which the country has been curiously absent since the 2003 invasion. Applying insights from broader literatures on popular politics and the Arab Spring and on transformations in Islamist politics can help uncover previously obscured aspects of Iraqi socio-political dynamics that help explain unforeseen modes of politics such as the leftist-Sadrist alliance.[25]

My research uses in-depth interviews to gather life story and social biography data on key actors in Iraq's civil trend and Sadr movement.[26] This data is used to uncover actors' primary fields of engagement and the social capitals they possess. This allows for exploration of their trajectories through social space and how these distinct pathways of socialisation imparted particular political perspectives and worldviews. I combine this data with ethnographic analysis of social action as it unfolds in particular contexts, whether this is embodied or expressed in discursive textual or audio-visual materials. Thus, I also draw on memoirs, books, articles, media interviews, television debates, social media posts and religious statements, all approached primarily as practices to be interpreted from the perspective of the social contexts in which they occur.[27] This data is used to describe the social terrain from which movements emerge, and in which they remain fundamentally engaged, as a landscape of social fields which function as meaning-giving contexts for action composed of practices, social relations of power, institutional arrangements, discourses and narratives within which agents are realised in particular modes of being.[28]

Interview data and textual resources are sometimes approached in a more straightforward historical manner to uncover details of the negotiations, meetings and

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[25] Breaking out of this 'Iraq lacuna' is the focus of chapter one.
[26] Ethics approval for this research stipulated that the author was only allowed to travel within the KRG which meant conducting interviews with key targets was logistically challenging. This was overcome to some extent by arranging interviews in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, or using remote electronic communication (Skype, email etc.)
[27] Baudouin Dupret et al. eds. *Ethnographies of Islam: Ritual Performances and Everyday Practices* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2013), 2-3.
[28] Schwedler, 118-119.

dialogues that occurred within, and between, the movements in question. Finally, I made use of the so-called 'Qayis al-Khaza'li Papers.' These are hundreds of pages of reports from the CIA-conducted interrogation of senior Sadr movement operative Shaykh Qais al-Khaza'li.[29] These documents were released into the public domain in mid-2018, and when properly contextualised provide a unique insight into the inner workings of the Sadr movement between 2003-2007 (when Khaza'li was captured by British SAS in Iraq).

My thesis consists of six chapters that follow a broadly chronological structure. Chapter one engages in a theoretical discussion of approaches to the study of social movements and strategic politics in Iraq. I use this chapter to set out the conceptual framework for the thesis. Chapter two focuses on the pre-invasion years, arguing that the post-2003 political strategies of the Iraqi left and the Sadr movement can only be properly understood in the context of the historical development of political subjects and the pre-invasion social bases of the two movements. Chapter three shifts to the post-invasion phase, analysing the shifting strategies of the Sadr movement between 2003-2014. Chapter four explains the strategic politics of the Iraqi left and the civil trend as two distinct, but related, social movements during the same period. Chapters five and six narrow the focus to the years of the civil trend-Sadrist convergence (five), and the subsequent electoral alliance between the Iraqi left and the Sadr movement which followed (six). Here, the two movements are considered side-by-side, reflecting the patterns of dynamic interactions that gathered pace from 2015. This thesis uses the IJMES transliteration system, but I have tried wherever possible to spell individual names as they are commonly used by the individuals themselves or in popular discourse.[30]

[29] 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers: Tactical Interrogation Reports,' available at *Homeland Security Digital Library.*
[30] See 'IJMES Translation and Transliteration guide.' https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-journal-of-middle-east-studies/information/author-resources/ijmes-translation-and-transliteration-guide

# CHAPTER ONE
# SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND STRATEGIC POLITICS IN IRAQ: KEY PROBLEMS AND APPROACHES

## I
## Introduction

This thesis is about two important social movements in Iraq about which little is known: the civil trend (*al-tayyār al-madanī*) and the Sadr movement. More specifically, it is about the strategic decisions these two movements made which led them to form a cross-ideological social movement coalition and eventually an electoral alliance (the leftist-Sadrist alliance) that went on to win Iraq's 2018 parliamentary elections. It also explores the strategies adopted by elements within these two movements who sought to resist this convergence and cross-movement cooperation. In a broader conceptual sense, this thesis is about the strategic politics of social movements, social movement coalition formation and how to think about the action situation in which social movement actors formulate political strategies.

How these conceptual questions are answered has important implications for how social movements, popular politics and the politics of resistance in Iraq are conceived, interpreted and represented. This can be seen in how knowledge produced about Iraq, particularly since the US-led invasion in 2003, has been caught up in competing structures of power that have distorted the picture of Iraqi society and politics in profound ways. As applied to Iraqi popular politics, these distortions have tended to produce accounts that home in on psycho-social dysfunctions, emotionalism and irrationalism, primordial attachments (tribalism, sectarianism), religious fundamentalisms, and other orientalist and cultural essentialist tropes. These are often construed as basic sociological categories that are thought to explain, or explain away, Iraqis' attempts to mobilise politically and resist various forms of domination.

Many of these intellectual currents have been critiqued in social movement theory (SMT) and Middle Eastern studies. However, scholars have tended to treat Iraq as *sui generis* and have been reluctant to include the country within broader comparative frameworks. This is unfortunate as it has allowed flawed and distorted depictions of social movement politics in

Iraq to circulate with relatively little challenge. Moreover, it has also meant that the interests motivating innovative scholarship elsewhere, such as that focused on popular politics and the Arab Spring, have rarely been applied to Iraq, closing off potentially fruitful avenues of investigation. Bringing the lacuna of Iraq studies into dialogue with these broader literatures helps clarify misconceptions about Iraq's social movement politics and to open up these phenomena to new possibilities of interpretation.

This chapter begins by breaking out of the Iraq lacuna and bringing the country's politics into dialogue with wider domains in SMT and literature on Islamist movements. This leads into a deeper theoretical appraisal of popular approaches to social movements and popular politics across the Arab world. Identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the most commonly applied analytical framework – political process theories (PPT) and the dynamics of contention model (DOC) – provides a bridge to setting out a practice-oriented approach to social movement coalitions and strategic politics in Iraq. The work of Pierre Bourdieu and French sociologist Michel Dobry is used to help explicate social movement politics by addressing the interaction of slow-moving historical processes and deeply embedded cultural formations with the more fluid structures associated with social crises.

## II
## The Iraq Lacuna: Social Movements and Islamist Politics

Iraq has been curiously absent from a range of comparative literatures which address topics of central concern to scholars engaging with the politics of the Arab world. The leftist-Sadrist alliance is particularly relevant to two broad domains: social movements and popular politics; and Islamist movements and their engagement in democratic politics and their transformations in terms of ideology and political behaviours. This section brings the Iraq lacuna into contact with theoretical literatures in these domains to show how Iraq's isolation within the social sciences has distorted the way social movements, popular politics and the country's Islamist groups have been represented and understood.

### *Iraq and the Arab Spring*

Iraq has been largely absent from comparative literature on popular politics and the Arab Spring.[1] This is partly explained by the challenging security conditions in the country since the 2003 invasion, which have mitigated against in-depth field work. This may also help explain why a preponderance of Iraq research and writing has come from less risk-averse foreign correspondents;[2] practitioners in the military and international development sectors;[3] defence and national security-focused think tanks;[4] and 'insider accounts' written by Iraqi political elites, intellectuals and journalists.[5] Each of these has its own unique qualities, but also particular vantage points coloured by personal, institutional and national interests. Moreover, these works can sometimes lack the scholar's particular strengths, i.e. theoretical sophistication and familiarity with broader comparative contexts. Some journalistic accounts, for example, have reached for the primordial-sectarian narrative as if it were the axiomatic framework for introducing readers to Iraqi society and politics.[6]

However, the isolation of Iraq in its own idiosyncratic lacuna is also plausibly a consequence of the antipathy of academia towards the US-led invasion in 2003. When it comes to popular politics, for instance, scholars tend to have strong normative commitments around social movements and their role in authentic processes of resistance, liberation and democratisation. In Iraq, these commitments risked entanglement in the moral quandaries of the invasion and post-2003 political order. It seems that, for many, the war in Iraq and 'imposition' of democracy set the country's experiences outside the framework of cross-national comparisons. Moreover, there has been a general view that the US invasion created and enshrined sectarian logics in Iraqi society and politics, skewing the forms of popular politics and resistance that emerged after the invasion.[7] However, the

[1] This section is based on a broad survey of around twenty monographs and edited volumes dealing with popular politics and the Arab Spring. These texts have typically focused on countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, Libya, Yemen, Jordan, Morocco, Syria, Palestine and Iran.
[2] Prominent examples include Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada: Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revival, and the Struggle for Iraq* (New York: Scribner, 2008).
[3] For an example of a military practitioner, see Nicholas Krohley, *The Death of the Mehdi Army: The Rise, Fall, and Revival of Iraq's Most Powerful Militia* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2015); for international development, see Emma Sky, *The Unravelling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq* (London: Atlantic Books, 2015).
[4] For examples, see 'Iraq's Muqtada Al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?' *International Crisis Group,* July 11, 2006; Marisa Cochrane, 'The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement,' *Institute for the Study of War,* 2009.
[5] Zuhair al-Jezairy, *The Devil You Don't Know* (London: Saqi, 2009); Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War Losing the Peace* (London: Yale University Press, 2007).
[6] See Nicholas Pelham, *A New Muslim Order: The Shia and the Middle East Sectarian Crisis* (London: I.B Tauris, 2008).
[7] This argument is made to justify the exclusion of Iraq from the broader Arab Spring framework in Rex Brynen et.al, 'The Mashreq: Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria,' in *Beyond the Arab Spring,* eds. Rex Bryen et al. (London: Lynne Reinner, 2012), 41.

invasion cannot always take centre stage as the cause of Iraq's supposed *sui generis* nature and exclusion from broader comparative frameworks.

Of particular importance in this context has been the popular politics of the Arab Spring and the burgeoning scholarly literature this has produced. The protests that erupted across the Middle East from early in 2011 reanimated academic interest in the role of social movements in the politics of the region. The notion of Arab regimes as well-entrenched and sclerotic, largely uncontested by societies that were too internally divided and unable to resist political domination, was thrown into question by a series of broad-based social mobilisations that succeeded in overthrowing, or seriously challenging, many of the region's autocratic rulers.

This retraction of political hegemony in the face of popular politics proved fertile intellectual territory for scholars developing new conceptual approaches and asserting a different set of research priorities that challenged prevailing assumptions about political dynamics in the region. What emerged was a reinvigorated agenda for research focused on bottom-up politics, social movements, the political uses of public space, forms of strategic agency embodied in tactical coalition politics and everyday modes of resistance.[8] Much of this scholarship also had a more or less explicit normative inflection. The social movements of the Arab Spring were celebrated for their apparent spontaneity and lack of internal hierarchies,[9] as well as their pluralistic and universalising political identities and how these were shaped by public spaces and the public sphere.[10] These movements were thus heralded as socially integrative, their modes of action and discursive articulations entailing a transcending of social divides. The protests of the Arab Spring became phenomena through which scholars sought to unravel the process of transition from various forms of autocracy to democracy.[11]

Iraq was largely excluded from this literature despite sharing many characteristics with the politics of other Arab states during this period. Forms of popular politics, social

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[8] Fawaz A. Gerges ed., *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the New Arab World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1. Also, see Charles Tripp, *The power and the People: Paths of resistance in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

[9] A more critical assessment of this lack of leadership in the Arab Spring revolts can be found in Asef Bayat, *Revolutions without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 2017).

[10] For examples, see Charles Tripp, 'The Politics of Resistance and the Arab Uprisings' in *The New Middle East,* 135; and Lisa Anderson, 'Authoritarian Legacies and Regime Change: Towards Understanding Political Transition in the Arab World,' in *The New Middle East,* 44-59.

[11] Anderson, 'Authoritarian Legacies'.

movements and the politics of resistance have been prominent features of Iraq's post-2003 experience. There were even protests in Baghdad's own Tahrir Square in 2011, sometimes referred to as the 'Iraqi Spring,' as well as in the Kurdish region, and there were subsequent episodes of protest in Sunni provinces in 2012-2013.[12] This exclusion has meant that, compared to the Arab Spring literature which has been rooted in prevailing paradigms and debates in the social sciences, analyses of Iraq have applied a more eclectic range of conceptual lenses, often with distorting effects. In fact, many analyses of Iraqi politics seem to draw on concepts and theoretical suppositions, whether consciously or implicitly, that have been fiercely critiqued elsewhere, particularly in the broader domains of SMT and Middle Eastern studies.

More specifically, the imprint of three overlapping intellectual trends is particularly visible on analyses of Iraqi social movement politics. These are psycho-social structural strain theories, modernisation theory and Orientalism and cultural essentialism. Scholars of collective behaviour in the 1950s and 1960s understood protests in psycho-social terms, drawing on notions of the mob and the 'madness' of crowds, deviance and group emotion, social dysfunction and integrative failure, or frustration-aggression stemming from perceived relative deprivation. Similarly, a psycho-social strain of modernisation theory construed protests and social movements as mechanistic and emotion-driven responses to the socio-economic dislocations resulting from modernisation. Primordial attachments to 'traditional' forms of social identity (tribe and sect and so forth), left over by a stalled or disrupted process of modernisation, were thought to explain away modes of popular politics in terms of an immoveable tension between pre-modern social structures and modernising states and their allies amongst the urban-middle class.[13]

In the Arab world, these notions overlapped with Orientalist tropes and cultural essentialisms. Orientalism's view of popular politics in Muslim societies tended to depict chaotic and irrational phenomena driven by extremism, religious fanaticism and unbridled emotionalism intersecting with opportunistic elite manipulation.[14] Cultural essentialism,

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[12] One rare examples of Iraq's 2011 protest movement considered within an Arab Spring framework is Haifa Zangana, 'Iraq' in *Dispatches from the Arab Spring,* eds. Paul Amar and Vijay Prashad (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

[13] For further elaboration, see John Chalcraft, *Popular Politics and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 8-13; and Zackary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 130-141.

[14] Chalcraft, *Popular Politics,* 10-11.

meanwhile, cast sect, tribe and religious identities as immutable, homogenous and primordial sociological categories which, as Faleh A. Jabar has argued:

> Lends a fixed essence to communal spaces and structures and the identity (or identities) they produce, sometimes imbued even with a monodimensional social or political activism as if religious culture in and of itself creates a unifying space of a social and political nature.[15] [Shiʿism as 'a religion of protest,' for example].[16]

These structures of thought were not merely a matter of academic interest, but part of a practice of power by which emerging and consolidating political systems, and their international patrons, sought to justify their domination and exclusion of certain groups. As Charles Tripp has argued:

> Terrorism, disorder, sectarianism, fanaticism and tribalism have all been projected onto resistance movements across the region as if these terms, rather than their struggle against entrenched and exclusive power, were the most appropriate ways of thinking of them – and dealing with them – as political agents.[17]

These features of popular politics and resistance (sectarianism, violence etc.) came to be understood as justifications for the exclusionary practices of power and domination enacted by states, regimes or other groups of elites, rather than, in part, the products of these practices.

When applied to Iraq, these overlapping intellectual currents produced accounts focused on sectarian dynamics, their supposed primordial origins and their persistent salience resulting from Iraq's stalled, or failed, modernisation. For example, Ali Allawi's[18] highly influential book draws on the work of Iraqi sociologist, 'Ali al-Wardy, to argue that 'the process of modernisation and urbanisation [is] skin deep in Iraq,' a 'civilised veneer' that masks a 'conflict-strewn society' in which 'The Great Divides' between Sunni and Shiʿa, whose roots go back to early Islamic schisms, and between tribe and urban centres, were never far from the surface.[19] Similarly, Nicholas Pelham, a well-respected foreign correspondent, wrote what he himself described as a 'sectarian account of Iraq's past' in which present social strife is explained in terms of the 'mythological conflict' between Sunni

[15] Faleh A. Jabar, *The Shiʿite Movement in Iraq* (Saqi: London, 2003), 33.
[16] Hamid Dabashi, *Shiʿism: A Religion of Protest* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).
[17] Charles Tripp, *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 14.
[18] Allawi served for different periods as Iraq's Minister for Trade, Defence and Finance between 2003 and 2006.
[19] Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation*: Winning the War, Losing the Peace (London: Yale University Press), 15-16.

and Shiʿa whose relevance persists 'despite intermittent attempts to paper over the differences.'[20]

This notion of sectarian identities as constituting an unchanging and ever-present substrate through which all politics is modulated is also central to Vali Nasr's bestselling *The Shia Revival*. Here, Iraqi political movements and groups are constrained to acting out monological sectarian strategies for which their ideologies and rhetoric are merely window dressing. Baʿthist Arab nationalism was a cover for a Sunni-sectarian logic of power, whereas the Shiʿa's embrace of Iraqi nationalism and democratic rhetoric post-2003 was a veneer masking a deeper sectarian agenda, a 'vehicle for Shiʿa identity' and a means of 'empowering Shias' and 'entrenching that power in state and society.'[21]

Political agency, in this view, is confined to a narrow elite (returning Shiʿi exiles, autochthonous elites, or the US and regional powers) driving political developments from the top-down by tapping into, and exploiting, primordial and mythological essences. Even scholars resistant to these essentialist categories have typically depicted protests in Iraq as a top-down affair characterised by elite manipulation. Consequently, popular politics and the politics of resistance are cast as destabilising and fragmentary, a threat to the coherence and integrity of the Iraqi state, itself presented now as the site of a modern, unifying and universal national identity.[22] Similarly, literature on the Iraqi public sphere has focused on its 'Lebanonization,' i.e. on how powerful elites have divided public space into ethno-sectarian enclaves.[23] Rather than playing a socially integrative function by fostering the creation of universal political subjects, the Iraqi public sphere is said to work against democratisation, modernisation and liberalisation by exacerbating social fragmentation.[24]

Iraqi protests have also frequently been construed as emotional, angry and irrational outbursts. Media articles frequently refer to protests in terms of 'angry' and 'violent' 'mobs'.[25] More scholarly analyses have also deployed psycho-social structural-strain

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[20] Pelham, *A New Muslim Order,* viii-ix.
[21] Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival*: *How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 173 & 231.
[22] Juan Cole, 'The Rise of Religious and Ethnic Mass Politics in Iraq', in *Religion and Nationalism in Iraq,* eds. David Little and Donald K. Swearer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 62.
[23] Paul Cochrane, 'The "Lebanonization" of the Iraqi media', *Transnational Broadcasting Studies* 16, 2006.
[24] Deborah Amos, 'Confusion, Contradiction and Irony,' *Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy,* 2010, 35-37.
[25] Two examples include Bel Trew, 'Iraq protests: Three killed as oil-rich southern regions rage over joblessness,' *The Independent,* July 16, 2018. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/iraq-protests-deaths-oil-south-basra-samawa-a8449706.html ; 'Angry Basra Mob Set Government Buildings on Fire,' *al-Bawaba,* September 7, 2018. https://www.albawaba.com/news/angry-basra-mob-set-government-buildings-fire-1182802

interpretations. Harith Hasan, for example, analyses Basra's protest movement in terms of the interaction of demographic patterns and dysfunctional socio-economic development.[26] Ultimately, social movements and protests in Iraq came to be understood in these terms, as 'Sunni protests' or 'Shiʿi demonstrations,' either called into being and directed by elites, or mechanistic, violent and chaotic outbursts reflecting some underlying systemic disequilibrium, or some combination of the two. Consequently, the rational, strategic, creative, ideological and nonelite aspects of popular politics in Iraq have all but disappeared from view.

Thus, these two fields of study – Iraq and the Arab Spring – appear as mirror images in how they interpret and represent popular politics and social movements. The table below, highlights these key differences:

*Table 1 Comparing frameworks: Popular politics and the Arab Spring versus Iraq*[27]

| POPULAR POLITICS AND THE ARAB SPRING | POPULAR POLITICS IN IRAQ |
|---|---|
| Emerge via bottom-up processes and from sites outside the state/political elites. | Driven from the top-down by elites or foreign states. |
| Lack hierarchical structure and top-down strategic direction. | Strategically directed by elite manipulation. |
| Characterised by modes of action and discourse that are socially integrative. | Characterised by particularistic and exclusivist identities often based on ethnic or sectarian categories construed in cultural essentialist terms. |
| Democratise public spaces and the public sphere. | Reproduce a public sphere riven by, and generative of, sectarian and ethnic divisions. |
| Articulate pluralistic and universalistic forms of political identity, productive of social and political integration. | Articulate exclusivist and particularistic forms of political identity, productive of social and political fragmentation. |
| Embody creative, rational strategies of resistance to political domination. Constitute elements in social processes of rational, progressive change. | Embody irrational and emotional outbursts triggered by a combination of elite manipulation and psycho-social strains. Constitute threat to political stability and the integrity and coherence of the Iraqi state. |

[26] Harith Hasan, 'Beyond Security: Stabilization, Governance, and Socioeconomic Challenges in Iraq,' *Atlantic Council,* July 2018.
[27] This draws on a survey of 15 texts on the Arab Spring, some are specifically cited in this chapter and others are included in the bibliography.

| | |
|---|---|
| Situate social movement phenomena as within, and produced by, processes of modernity. | Situate social movement politics as emerging from processes outside modernity. Social and political subjectivities are not elucidated in social constructionist terms, but are naturalised as residual and somehow 'fundamental' sociological categories over which modernity has been layered as a superficial veneer. |

These divergences do not reflect empirical distinctions between Iraqi socio-political dynamics and those of the wider Arab world. Rather, they emerge, at least in part, from the contrasting analytical lenses and priorities which researchers have brought to bear in the two contexts. This thesis argues that breaking out of the Iraq lacuna can help rectify some of the distortions outlined above and generate new insights about Iraqi socio-political dynamics.

### *The Civil Trend and the Sadr Movement*

How do these broad themes intersect with the civil trend and the Sadr movement? The organisation of Iraq's secular civil society in the post-2003 period has rarely been a topic for scholarly research.[28] Iraq's secular-leftist and liberal forces have generally been discounted by most observers as too marginalised to be considered politically relevant.[29] Ismael, for instance, charted what he saw as the decline to the political margins of the once powerful ICP.[30] The civil trend itself, as a distinct social movement within which the ICP is just one particularly important part, has rarely been the subject of research, despite its increasing influence over Iraqi politics since 2009.[31]

More commonly, Iraqi secular civil society has been understood in terms of non-political 'grassroots' social activism or elite cultural activity, both concerned primarily with defending the boundaries and autonomy of these marginal spaces from the encroachment of the

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[28] Eric Davis, for instance, has argued that 'most analyses of Iraqi politics have focused on the behaviour of political elites. The lack of focus on nonelite dimensions of Iraqi politics and society has not only had the effect of representing political processes as venal and corrupt… [i]t has also tended to obscure the efforts to reconstitute a functioning civil society,' see Eric Davis, 'The Historical Genesis of the Public Sphere in Iraq, 1900-1963', in *Publics, Politics, and Participation*, ed. Seteney Shami ed (New York: SSRC, 2009), 386.
[29] Toby Dodge, 'State and society in Iraq ten years after regime change: the rise of a new authoritarianism,' *International Affairs* 89: 2, 2013: 254.
[30] Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 297 & 303.
[31] The importance of 2009 as the date of emergence for the civil trend is discussed in chapter four.

Islamist political elites and their non-state allies.[32] Conventional thinking holds that the social and political marginalisation of these individuals and groups stems from their lack of resources to buy into Iraq's clientelist political economy that leverages sectarian and ethnic identities and material and coercive forms of capital. Consequently, secular civil society's attempts to mobilise politically have been easily co-opted or repressed. From this flows a prevailing picture of Iraqi society as afflicted by an inherent socio-structural weakness that inhibits effective strategies of resistance to political domination.[33] The accompaniment to this picture is a constraining of political agency to a narrow elite and the intra-elite 'strategic bargains' they strike which have leveraged and reproduced a sectarian and ethnic social segmentation.[34]

Where literature investigating Iraq's secular civil society and protest movements has been resistant to Orientalist tropes and essentialist categories, it nevertheless tends to ascribe them a curiously similar monological activism. Iraq's protest movements have thus been depicted as homogenous socio-cultural entities, lauded for their inclusivity of distinct social groups, but seldom, if ever, unpacked as internally contested domains.[35] Rather, in this literature, Iraqi protest movements seem to weld together different social formations into a monolithic bloc with a unitary ideological and strategic orientation. In reality, as this thesis will show, Iraq's secular-oriented politics and social movements are structured by multiple dimensions of intra-movement struggle including between centre and periphery (Baghdad versus Basra), over leadership, ideology and political strategies and even over the question of politicisation itself. The failure to foresee, and then explain, the leftist-Sadrist alliance, flows partly from the reluctance to open the black box of Iraq's so-called 'progressive' social movements and properly explore their internal dynamics.[36]

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[32] Juliet Kerr, '"The biggest problem we face is keeping our independence": Party Oppressions of Civil Society in the New Iraq,' *Discussion papers (DP45),* LSE (2009); and Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 278.
[33] Dodge, 'State and society in Iraq,' 254.
[34] Toby Dodge, *Iraq from War to a New Authoritarianism* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 40-48.
[35] For examples, see Faleh A. Jabar, 'The Iraqi Protest Movement: From Identity Politics to Issue Politics,' *LSE Middle East Centre (MEC) Paper Series*, June 22, 2018. https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88294/1/Faleh_Iraqi%20Protest%20Movement_Published_English.pdf; and Ali Issa, *Against All Odds: Voices of Popular Struggle in Iraq* (New York: Tadween Publishing, 2015). In the latter text, the author misleadingly bundles together a disparate group of actors with divergent ideological perspectives (ranging from communists to Ba'thists and pro-Islamic State Sunni sectarians) into a single category of 'progressive' 'secular' civil society activism.
[36] A tendency to see secular civil society and Islamist politics as two monolithic blocs engaged in a zero-sum struggle for Iraq's future obscured how intra-movement cleavages rendered the boundaries between the two sets of actors more permeable to tactical actions, and particularly to forms of cross-ideological cooperation. See Amatzia Baram, Saddam Husayn and Islam (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2014), 348.

Literature on the Sadrists, perhaps more than any other social movement in Iraq, has been coloured by the distorting lenses outlined above. Thus, Sadrist violence and sectarianism have often been treated as inherent to the movement and as factors which explain its political behaviour. Cole, for instance, wrote in 2003 that the Sadr movement:

> …is best seen as a sectarian phenomenon in the "sociology of religions" sense… It is highly puritanical and xenophobic, and it is characterised by an exclusivism unusual in Iraqi Shiʿism. To any extent that it emerges as a leading social force in Iraq, it will prove polarizing and destabilizing.[37]

It is not a question here of whether these characterisations are empirically accurate, but of the extent to which they are construed as *explanans* as opposed to *explanandum*. Understanding these features as contingent aspects of the Sadr movement, shaped by particular social conditions, helps explain why, when these conditions changed, the group shifted its behaviour and pursued bridge-building strategies with other social and political groups. Cole, by contrast, argues that his 'sectarian' model for the movement 'predicts that it will attempt strongly to demarcate itself off from the mainstream.'[38]

Analyses of the Sadr movement have also typically been elite centric, focusing on Muqtada and his statements and actions, particularly his ability to manipulate the supposedly emotionally unstable and mob-like Sadrist social base.[39] Other Sadrist actors and forms of practice have rarely been explored.[40] This focus on Muqtada has led to a reliance on psychology-oriented lenses. This manifests in depictions that include the once-ubiquitous image of the 'firebrand cleric,' but today focus primarily on his supposedly 'unstable personality' and 'cult-like following,'[41] and his immaturity and unpredictable moods.[42] Others have emphasised Muqtada's 'Mahdist obsession' as a psychological key

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[37] Juan Cole, 'The United States and Shiʿite Religious Factions in Post-Ba'thist Iraq,' *Middle East Journal*, 57, no. 4 (2003): 544.
[38] Cole, '*The United States,'* 544.
[39] Patrick Cockburn, for instance, is keen to paint a picture of Muqtada as a shrewd political operator who shifts his political strategies to adapt to circumstances, e.g. 'His resources were limited but he deployed them with energy and skill,' Cockburn, *Muqtada: Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revival, and the Struggle for Iraq* (London: Scribner, 2008), 127.
Media analyses typically depict Muqtada as 'directing protests', moving his followers around like chess pieces on a board. Simon Tisdall, 'Moqtada al-Sadr: who is the cleric directing Iraq's protests?' *The Guardian,* May 2, 2016. http://goo.gl/B1EqHM
[40] The focus has been on Muqtada, a handful of top Sadr-movement lieutenants, typically in the Sadrists' paramilitary wing, e.g. see Cochrane, 'The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement'.
[41] Nasr, *The Shiʿa Revival,*191.
[42] Elijah J. Magnier, 'Moqtada al-Sadr and Iran: A Long Love-Hate Relationship,' *Middle East Politics,* September 15, 2019. This view of Muqtada's mental instability is widely held by his detractors. For example, during his interrogation by the CIA, Qais al-Khaz'ali stated that the 'core problem' with the Sadr movement was '[Muqtada himself [who] is not stable, but he is constantly changing his mind and this reflects on his followers…This mind changing creates too mch waste, obstacles, and hardships because you do not

to interpreting the movement's behaviour.[43] Alternatively, a crude 'power politics' model stands in for a psychological diagnosis. In this case, Muqtada becomes the canny political operator, a 'cynical Machiavellian looking to exploit [Iraq's] failed statehood for his own outsize political ambitions.'[44]

In the absence a sociological model of the movement as a whole, analyses have been constrained to this type of divination of Muqtada's mental states. The futility of this approach, however, leads to the conclusion that attempting to rationalise the political behaviour of the Sadr movement at all is a fool's errand. This view rests on the observation that Muqtada's political behaviour is not guided by any stable set of political principles or ideas, but by a ceaseless search for 'relevance' within the domain of Iraq's power politics. Nibras Kazimi, for example, has argued that, 'No one… has any unique insight into Sadr's thinking, or the means to influence it. His mind is quicksand…[he] lurches haphazardly to and fro, and his movements might as well be described as policy by divination.'[45]

When ordinary Sadrists are addressed, it is normally in terms of psycho-social analyses which depict the group as a lower-class mob, susceptible to elite manipulation and prone to dangerous eruptions of emotion-driven political irrationalism.[46] Sadrist social movement politics and protests, in this view, do not express rational, strategic, creative or ideologically-informed practices, but are merely an instrumental tool and extension of Muqtada's power politics. Nor are their actions construed as socially or politically integrative or potentially generative of positive political change. Rather, they are a 'powerful but chaotic…street (or barrio) politics,' and a threat to social cohesion and political stability.[47]

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understand his right clear thinking in order to dialogue or converse with him.' 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers: Tactical Interrogation Reports (TIR),' Report no: 200243-007, *Homeland Security Digital Library*, 17.

[43] Amatzia Baram, 'Sadr the Father, Sadr the Son, the "Revolution in Shiʿism," and the Struggle for Power in the *Hawzah* of Najaf" in *Iraq Between Occupations: Perspectives from 1920 to the Present,* eds. Ronen Zeidel, Amatzia Baram, and Achim Rohde (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 153.

[44] Michael Weiss, 'Moqtada al-Sadr, the Donald Trump of Iraq,' *Daily Beast,* April 13, 2017. https://www.thedailybeast.com/moqtada-al-sadr-the-donald-trump-of-iraq

[45] Nibras Kazimi, 'Iraq: What was that all about?' *Talisman Gate,* May 10, 2016, https://talisman-gate.com/2016/05/10/iraq-what-was-that-all-about/

[46] It is not uncommon for Sadrists to be associated with derogatory terms such as *shroug/shrougi* ("uncivilised" Shiʿis from the south, especially al-'Amarah); *ghawgha* (lower class mob); and *mi'dan* (Buffalo herder, used to insult people from al-'Amarah and the southern marshlands). However, such language is more common amongst the urban Sunni population. Many of the Shiʿi secular elites who make up the ICP cadres are likely to have their roots in the south and places like al-'Amarah. These are more typically heard referring to the inhabitants of Sadr City as '*al-almāniyyin*' (the Germans) or '*al-itāliyyin*' (the Italians), an ironic joke highlighting their 'uncivilised' and 'uncultured' character.

[47] Nasr, *The Shia Revival,* 191. For further example, see Martin Chulov, 'Protesters in Iraq's green zone begin to withdraw,' *The Guardian,* May 1, 2016.

Given this prevailing image of the Sadr movement, it is unsurprising that its convergence with the civil trend from 2015 has been portrayed as a quintessential case of elite manipulation, the 'fake populism'[48] of a 'demagogue with a gift for manipulating a national media and opportunistically capitalizing on national crises.'[49] Muqtada, in this view, was seeking to exploit and instrumentalise the civil trend in a power politics 'play.' The new Sadrist political performance – with its moderate, secular and pluralistic façade – obscured the absence of a broader and more meaningful political project with deeper social, cultural and ideological components. Arguing in this vein, the only other scholarly treatment of the leftist-Sadrist alliance concluded that it was merely an 'instrumental coalition' in which 'collaboration neither relies on, nor generates larger identities.'[50]

### *Transformations in Islamist Movements*

Iraq has been similarly absent from comparative cross-country studies looking at transformations of Islamist movements. Patel, for instance, has recently argued that Iraq's Islamist groups, and particularly their engagement in electoral politics and cross-ideological and cross-sectarian coalition politics, 'beg for comparison with cases both in and out of the region,' yet this has rarely been attempted.[51] The Sadrists also make a particularly interesting case study because the movement's inclusion in formal, democratic politics did not seem to abate its use of violence but simply transferred this to other domains of conflict. This poses a challenge to the 'inclusion-moderation' hypothesis that has, until quite recently, been the dominant theoretical model for explaining how Islamist groups transform in response to political openings and greater participation in pluralistic political structures.[52]

Godwin has also recognised this disjuncture between theory and the Sadrist case.[53] However, Godwin attributes this to general conditions of instability (the civil war) which, he

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[48] For example, see Kirk H. Sowell, 'Iraq's Fake Populism and Anti-sectarianism,' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 9, 2016. Available at: http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/63777
[49] Weiss, 'Moqtada al-Sadr'; and Zalmay Khalilzad, 'Why American Needs Iran in Iraq,' *Politico Magazine*, May 2, 2016. http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/05/why-america-needs-iran-in-iraq-213865
[50] Damian Doyle, 'Pulling and Gouging: The Sadrist Line's Adaptable and Evolving Repertoire of Contention,' in *New Opposition in the Middle East,* Dara Conduit & Shahram Akbarzadeh eds. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018): 48.
[51] David Siddhartha Patel, 'The marginalization of Iraqi Islamists in Political Science,' *APSA* Mena Politics Newsletter, 2, no. 1 (2019): 3.
[52] Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
[53] Matthew J. Godwin, 'Political inclusion in unstable contexts: Muqtada al-Sadr and Iraq's Sadrist Movement,' *Contemporary Affairs* 5, no. 3 (July 2012): 448-456.

argues, led the Sadr movement to deprioritise the attainment of political power in favour of a reversion to violence. However, when he argues that it was this relative ebbing away of incentives to participate in politics versus violence that stalled, and then reversed, the process of 'moderation' (implying that had the movement continued to prioritise politics, it would have continued to moderate ideologically), Godwin appears to implicitly restate the inclusion-moderation hypothesis. His account also struggles to explain why when the civil war receded following the US troop surge in 2007 Sadrist violence did not decline but was simply transferred to a new context, i.e. intra-Shiʿi Islamist political and paramilitary conflict.

By contrast, this thesis makes a stronger critique against the inclusion-moderation model, arguing that Sadrist political engagement *ipso facto* exacerbated the group's violence *in particular contexts.* This was because it inserted the movement into new dynamics of competition and conflict within a political field wherein coercive violence was a central currency of power. At the same time, this transference of violence to political contexts defused the Sadr movement's coercive strategies vis-à-vis the religious field. Thus, whereas Godwin depicts unitary and homogenous shifts (radical to moderate, then a reversion to radicalism), what is elucidated here is a process of strategic diversification produced by the modulation of Sadrist practices through particular structuring contexts.

This emphasis on how localised structures and social contexts produce ideological heterogeneity and diverse strategic practices transforms current conceptualisations of the Sadr movement. Analyses that have depicted the Sadrists as a fairly homogenous socio-cultural entity whose leader imposes a unitary strategic orientation from the top-down, have missed the diversity in perspectives and orientations in overlooked strata of the movement and how these figure in the formation of the movement's strategic politics.[54] Moreover, this touches on broader conceptual frameworks for thinking about transformations in Islamist politics. There has been a tendency to think in terms of broad, epochal shifts which envisage Islamist groups transcending from one ideological mode to another (Islamist to post-Islamist, for example).[55] However, detailed case studies are increasingly revealing how local contexts shape Islamist politics in ways that are less coherent and more

[54] While fragmentations in the Sadrist paramilitary wing have been the focus of analyses, comparatively little has been written about divergences elsewhere in the movement, or conflicts over ideology as opposed to competition over resources.

[55] For an elaboration of this argument, see Thomas Pierret, 'Syria's Unusual "Islamic Trend": Political Reformists, the Ulema, and Democracy,' in *Post-Islamism: The Changing Faces of Political Islam*, ed. Asef Bayat (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

heterogeneous than notions of paradigmatic shifts would suggest.[56] The Sadrist case adds to this empirical picture.

Finally, when the Sadrists have been compared with other Islamist groups it is nearly always with Lebanon's Hizbullah.[57] However, the Sadr movement's religious messianism, as a particular mode of Islamist politics, suggests other dimensions of comparison could also be fruitful. As this thesis will explore, messianic religious mobilisations obviates the need for engagement in professional politics and the creation of distinct party-political modes of authority and legitimation.[58] This in turn raises important questions about how messianic Islamist movements respond to political inclusion and how ideological change can be measured in cases where movements do not appear to engage in systematic political ideology as a practice. In this context, it might be more interesting to compare the Sadr movement with the experience of Egypt's Shaykh Hazem Salah Abu Ismail and the 'revolutionary Salafi movement' following the fall of Mubarak in 2011, rather than with Lebanon's Hizbullah.[59]

## III
## Social Movements and Strategic Politics: Dynamics of Contention

Comparing analyses of social movements in Iraq with recent literature on popular politics and the Arab Spring clarifies some of the enduring idiosyncrasies in how social movements in Iraq, and particularly the civil trend and the Sadr movement, continue to be discussed and represented. This section digs deeper into the theoretical frameworks that fed into this Arab Spring literature, particularly the popular dynamics of contention (DOC) framework and its predecessor, political process theory (PPT). This theoretical current offers different and better ways of thinking about popular politics and social movements from those commonly applied in Iraq. However, PPT/DOC have their own weaknesses. Setting out

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[56] For examples, see Janine A. Clark, 'The Conditions of Islamist Moderation: Unpacking the conditions of cross-ideological cooperation in Jordan,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38 (2006): 539–60; and Pierret, 'Syria's Unusual "Islamic Trend.'

[57] For a discussion of flaws in the argument that equates the Sadr movement to Hizbullah, see Michael David Clark, 'The Iraqi Sadrist Movement and the "Hezbollah model": The case of Syria', paper presented at ISA Annual Convention, Toronto, 2014.

[58] Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (London: Hurst & Co., 2008), 265.

[59] Stéphane Lacroix & Ahmed Zaghloul Shalata, 'The Rise of Revolutionary Salafism in Post-Mubarak Egypt,' in *Egypt's Revolutions: Politics, Religion and Social Movements,* eds. Bernard Rougier & Stéphane Lacroix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

these critiques provides a bridge to the practice-oriented approach to social movements and strategic politics in Iraq which this thesis deploys.

### *Political Process Theory*

Beginning in the 1970s, social movement scholars set out to fill the explanatory gap between general conditions (the existence of grievance or relative deprivation, for example) and collective action (the outbreak of protests, civil unrest and revolutions and their particular modes of action). The primary concern of the new literature was to capture protest as a rational expression of strategic political agency. Thanks to the work of scholars such as Bert Klandermans, Hanspeter Kriesi, Doug McAdam, John McCarthy, Sidney Tarrow, Charles Tilly and Mayer Zald, this project eventually coalesced around a core of analytical concepts that, it was argued, constituted the intervening variables between social conditions and action. This approach became known as political process theory (PPT) and homed in on four key concepts: (1) political opportunities, or opportunity structures, the institutional incentives and constraints presented to actors by the political environment; (2) mobilizing structures, both formal movement organisations and informal social networks; (3) collective action frames, the cultural factors that influence actors' subjective orientations and interpretations; all of which fed into (4) repertoires of contention, the means by which claims and objectives are pursued.[60]

These concepts purported to capture the strategic actions of participants in social movement politics, showing how they build and utilise institutions and networks, mobilise resources and adapt to shifts in broad political structures and institutional constraints like regime openings or intra-elite cleavages. 'Cultural framing' was a later addition that sought to explain the way individuals or groups might respond differently to the same objective political opportunities depending on how these are perceived and interpreted within different cultural frameworks (either preexisting frameworks or ones built by actors themselves).[61] PPT succeeded in overturning the notion of popular politics as chaotic, irrational and mechanistic, focusing instead on its internal organisational processes and the deliberate strategic actions of social movement actors.

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[60] Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow & Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 14-15.
[61] For a critical discussion of the cultural framing concept from a practice-oriented perspective, see Nick Crossley, *Making Sense of Social Movements* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002), 139-143.

However, while PPT recovered a role for rational strategic agency, it did so in a way that inscribed it with a highly instrumental quality. This was visible, for example, in the model's approach to culture. PPT seemed to locate culture as somehow external to the agent, something constructed and manipulated by actors engaged in deliberate, calculated acts. McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, for instance, defined 'cultural framing' as 'the conscious, strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action.'[62] So defined, 'cultural frames' left important aspects of culture out of the picture.[63] If culture was a specific delimited social sphere or type of action (an object and tool of strategic behaviour), what filled the vacuum of actors' identities and interests which are logically prior to any formulation of strategic objectives? This is where process theorists sometimes smuggled an implicit rational action model, and its methodological individualism, back into the picture.

This notion of strategic action as deliberate, calculated acts struggles to distinguish between cases where an actor adopts a particular cultural form for instrumental purposes (a conscious calculation that it will 'resonate' with a particular audience), and when this action results from a shared cultural background. In the latter case, 'resonance' is not a function of strategic calculation, but an in-built structural feature. Not only did the PPT model seem to suggest that only the instrumental relationship with culture could be construed as rational agency, but it lacked the means of perceiving and describing social action other than in these narrow terms. This observation applies to the previously discussed inclusion-moderation hypothesis which focuses on the strategic adaptations of actors in response to shifting political opportunities but lacks a deeper theory of ideational change. It cannot, as Schwedler argues, 'distinguish between actors who are hiding radical agendas and those whose views have substantively evolved?'[64] This was an important question that has surrounded the leftist-Sadr alliance.

Despite bearing the marks of a residual methodological individualism, PPT was more frequently criticised for its mechanistic structuralism. Goodwin and Jaspers, for instance, observed that in many analyses PPT's core concepts functioned as static structures that set

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[62] Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy & Mayer N. Zald, 'Introduction,' in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6.
[63] Goodwin and Jasper list the following: traditions, common sense, material artefacts, idioms, rituals, news routines, know-how, identities, discourse, and speech genres, see Jeff Goodwin & James M. Jasper, 'Caught in a Winding, Snarling Vine: The Structural Bias of Political Process Theory,' in *Rethinking Social Movements: Structure, Meaning and Emotion* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 23-24.
[64] Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation,* 23.

the initial conditions of protests and determined their forms and chances of success, rather than as dynamic and interactive dimensions of movement mobilisations. This structuralism equated to a mechanistic, hydraulic explanatory metaphor. Thus, opportunity structures opened and closed like windows, channelling movement mobilisation down particular paths. Just as PPT risked reifying culture into just another objective structure ('framing' being another structural metaphor), mobilising structures often seemed to reduce dynamic elements like social networks or political opportunities to yet more static structures.[65]

### *PPT and Social Movement Coalitions*

This feature of PPT also had implications for how SMT sought to explain social movement coalitions and coalition formation. Construed more as static structures than as dynamic elements constructed via social movement politics, social networks, mobilising structures and cultural framing etc. lost much of their interest as explanatory factors. Thus, generally observable features of social movement coalitions (e.g. dense social ties, shared cultural and ideological frameworks and membership of formal movement organisations) were presented as the *explanans*, whereas what really required explanation was the existence of these features themselves.

The outcome has sometimes been analyses that describe, rather than explain, the phenomenon. For example, in Van Dyke and McCammon's study of social movement coalition politics, the authors emphasise preexisting social ties and shared cultural frameworks, over and above objective political opportunities, as crucial factors explaining the emergence of social movement coalitions.[66] However, in a minimalist sense, any form of cooperative action presupposes a context of social interaction and mutual intelligibility. This would apply *a fortiori* for intense forms of political cooperation. Thus, the factors identified as important independent variables are, presumably, already built into the definition of a social movement coalition. They describe what a social movement coalition generally is, not the factors that explain how it became so.

A more persuasive argument is that while dense social ties and shared cultural frameworks are not by themselves useful predictors of coalition politics, specific types of

[65] Goodwin & Jaspers, 'Caught in a Winding,' 17.
[66] Nella Van Dyke & Holly J. McCammon, 'Introduction,' *Strategic Alliances: Coalition Building and Social Movements* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xxiii.

these features will facilitate particular forms of coalition politics under certain circumstances. For instance, building a shared ideological framework will open up possibilities for coalition politics where participants are engaged in practices wherein systematic ideology is the primary heuristic device for interpreting political action (e.g. the Iraqi left and secular intelligentsia). However, these features are less relevant to alliances engaged in bandwagoning against a common enemy and that don't require defining or defending in broader ideological terms (e.g., Ayad Allawi's cross-sectarian and nominally-secular political alliances such as al-Iraqiya). However, again, the interesting sociological question is explaining how and why actors acquire these social relationships, identities and ideological perspectives, and why they attach particular meanings to them.

### *Dynamics of Contention*

In 2001, responding to many of the critiques outlined above, McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly released *Dynamics of Contention* which sought to develop and repackage PPT as a less static, more dynamic and interactionist model of social movements.[67] The authors recognised that PPT had packed more of its causal power into the arrows between the model's four core concepts, than into the concepts themselves. Consequently, PPT had 'provided still photographs of contentious moments rather than dynamic interactive sequences.'[68] The solution was to make 'mechanisms,' and their 'concatenation' (linking together) in 'processes,' the new building blocks of causal explanation.

Mechanisms – broken down into environmental, cognitive and relational mechanisms – were defined as 'delimited sorts of events that change relations among specified elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations.'[69] Meanwhile, 'processes' referred to the way in which mechanisms were thought to combine in recurrent patterns across different episodes of 'contentious politics'. DOC asked scholars to recognise as explanation 'the identification of causal chains consisting of mechanisms that reappear in a wide variety of settings but in different sequences and combinations, hence with different collective outcomes.'[70] These mechanisms and processes were argued to be what 'drive

[67] McAdam, Tarrow, Tilly, *Dynamics.*
[68] McAdam, Tarrow, Tilly, *Dynamics,* 18.
[69] McAdam, Tarrow, Tilly, *Dynamics,* 24.
[70] McAdam, Tarrow, Tilly, *Dynamics,* 23.

contention,' and explained its features, e.g. the formation of its collective actors and their political identities, contentious performances and repertoires.[71]

Breaking down contentious episodes into their interactive mechanisms and processes was also pitched as a useful way to open up a broader array of political phenomena to comparative analysis. Thus, the types of events that had previously been the focus of social movement scholarship (protest mobilisations, sit-ins, riots etc.) could be both situated within their broader context as elements within strategies of contention that included a more diverse range of tactical actions, and compared with other forms of contentious political claim-making not normally considered within the oeuvre of social movement literature. Tarrow, for instance, argued that even civil wars could be considered 'larger episodes of contention from which they emerge and to which they may eventually give way.'[72] Moreover, the distinction which the authors of DOC made between contained and transgressive contention helped to clarify the way contentious episodes often transitioned between, or exploited ambiguities between, formal politics and processes, and extra-institutional and/or extra-legal means of contention. The centrality of protest movement itself thus recedes in favour of a focus on means and ways of collective political claim-making in general, as Tarrow and Tilly argued: 'Contentious politics thus brings together three familiar features of social life: contention, collective action, and politics.'[73]

DOC was quickly taken up by scholars interested in social movements and opposition politics in the Arab world, particularly following the Arab Spring, with multiple studies emerging in this vein from 2010 onwards.[74] This scholarship has been particularly effective at uncovering previously hidden social dynamics and nonelite dimensions of popular politics. DOC's pivot in emphasis away from static structures and towards examining the ways in which social interactions can reconfigure both structures and cognitive frameworks was another important development. So-called 'relational mechanisms,' such as social brokerage, have been used to uncover the contingency and plasticity of structures in

[71] Charles Tilly & Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 28-29.
[72] Sidney Tarrow, 'Inside Insurgencies: Politics and Violence in an Age of Civil War,' *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 3 (2007): 596.
[73] Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics,* 7.
[74] For example, see Joel Beinin & Frédéric Vairel, *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013); Neil Ketchley, 'Contentious politics and the 25th January Egyptian revolution,' (PhD diss., LSE, 2014); Dara Conduit & Shahram Akbarzadeh eds, *New Opposition in the Middle East* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

relation to agents' strategic behaviours.[75] Meanwhile, social networks and communicative interactions have been approached as creative and dynamic sites of social activity. This has furthered exploration of the contentious negotiation of identities, norms and ideological perspectives that are important internal processes in movement mobilisations (no longer construed as 'merely expressions of structure, rationality, consciousness, or culture').[76]

### *Limitations of DOC for Strategic Social Movement Politics*

Despite these strengths, DOC has several weaknesses that inhibit its explanatory potential vis-à-vis social movement politics in Iraq. Chalcraft identifies the heart of these problems as lying in 'the shapelessness of DOC's weightless, interactionist ontology.'[77] Similarly, Crossley argues that the ad hoc integration of cultural factors into process models via 'frames' and 'repertoires' only highlights the absence of underlying theoretical coherence, pushing the model of agency 'into an unclear and eclectic no man's land.'[78] This shapeless ontology does not help to grapple with the causal forces contained within a 'thick' historical conception of an explanatory context (cultural sedimentation, relations of power, normative hierarchies etc.) from which social movements emerge.

DOC, therefore, seems best equipped to describe the social processes occurring during a particular critical episode of social movement politics, rather than to grapple with more historically oriented questions about the formation of collective political subjects over the longue durée. However, even when exploring the former, it is more helpful to think of the effects of mechanisms and processes (e.g. social brokerage) as resulting from their situatedness within dynamic and historically constituted cultural context than as concatenating in a forceless void. In fact, causal explanation, depends first on unpacking context of social action as a localised site of routine action and social struggle, and only second on identifying the mechanisms which describe more observable features of social mobilisations.

The weaknesses in PPT/DOC outlined above have manifest in scholarly literature on the leftist-Sadrist alliance. The other scholarly treatment of this topic deploys the DOC

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[75] Killian Clarke used social brokerage to analyse to reveal the plasticity of social structures during Egypt's 2011 revolution, see Killian Clarke, 'Unexpected Brokers of Mobilization Contingency and Networks in the 2011 Egyptian Uprising,' *Comparative Politics* 46, no. 4 (2014)*:* 379-397.
[76] McAdam, Tarrow, Tilly, *Dynamics,* 22.
[77] Chalcraft, *Popular Politics*, 27.
[78] Crossley, *Making Sense*, 170.

framework and argues that the Sadrists' 'contentious repertoire,' 'mobilises Iraqis to participate in contentious action by employing an adaptable and symbolic collective action frame configured to leverage openings in Iraq's discursive opportunity structure.'[79] This description consistently emphasises deliberate, calculated acts of strategic agency. The Sadrists are always in an instrumental posture vis-à-vis an external social reality: 'adapting,' 'leveraging,' 'employing,' 'configuring' etc. The ultimate purpose of this instrumental behaviour is an 'attempt to demonstrate enduring relevance in Iraqi society and politics.'[80] This supposed search for an ambiguous 'relevance' becomes the taken-for-granted motor of Sadrist behaviour. It stands in for an historical and sociological account of identity that must be logically prior to the definition of collective subjects and their strategic objectives. The conclusion that the leftist-Sadrist alliance is merely an 'instrumental coalition,' in which 'collaboration neither relies on, nor generates larger identities,' follows not from an empirically rich investigation of the actors involved and their practices, but is imposed on the analysis by the limitations of the analytical framework employed. [81]

## IV
## A Practice-Oriented Approach to Social Movements and Strategic Politics in Iraq

Bourdieu's sociology, which sees practices emerging from the interaction of his core concepts (habitus, capital and field), has rarely been applied to the study of social movements and popular politics.[82] This is partly a consequence of the theory's key strength, the way it directs researchers toward the deep-lying structures of power that shape social behaviour. Consequently, Bourdieu's theory of action is interested in what is implicit, embodied, habitual and taken for granted about social reality, and is thus commonly seen as oriented toward explaining the durability and reproduction of social systems and patterns of behaviour over time. This approach appears less adapted to explaining the strategic behaviour of social movements that emerge during social crisis when routine social

[79] Doyle, 'Pulling and Gouging,' 45.
[80] Doyle, 'Pulling and Gouging,' 45.
[81] Doyle, 'Pulling and Gouging,' 48.
[82] Nick Crossley has been at the forefront of advancing Bourdieu's sociology within social movement theory. Crossley argues: '…though Bourdieu seldom deals directly with the issue of movements, his theory of practice provides the most fruitful conceptual framework for anchoring the sociology of social movements.' Crossley, *Making Sense,* 15.

relations are disrupted and boundaries between social sectors appear to dissolve in the face of broad-based social mobilisations.

This view, however, may reflect the foreshortened time scale within which social movement literature is accustomed to working and its privileging of the internal dynamics of highly contentious episodes.[83] By contrast, this thesis argues that understanding the strategic behaviour of social movements requires attention not only to how movement actors interact with opportunities and constraints under crisis conditions, but also to the historical formation of political subjects and a deeper examination of the social terrain of emergence. This approach also offers a different notion of strategic agency, one that moves away from the focus on conscious calculations and decisions taken in fleeting decision-moments, in favour of a more complex understanding of human will as an historically-constituted activity of many parts and phases.[84] The rationality of agency, in this view, is not about eluding determining structures, but is understood from the perspective of the social structures which inscribe social action with its teleological character.

### *A Practice-Oriented Approach*

Central to the critical discussion of PPT/DOC above has been the theory's problematic approach to the agent-structure problem. This is a critical concern for a thesis about the strategic politics of social movements since strategic politics implies a certain type of relationship between agents and their environment. This is described here as 'strategic perspective' on social relations characterised by a greater sense of contingency in social reality. Yet this perspective should not be understood in terms of a transcendental position from which actors strategically adapt to changing institutional constraints and opportunities and manipulate movement resources and cultural frames to achieve certain ends. Rather, it should be theorised as a particular form of social embeddedness.

In this context, a confusion arises, on the one hand, from PPT/DOC's inheritance of a problematic methodological individualism from rational action theory; and, on the other, its

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[83] This develops Reese et al.'s call to take a longer time frame into consideration when investigating the emergence of social movement coalitions. Ellen Reese, Christine Petit & David Meyer, 'Sudden Mobilization,' in *Strategic Alliances*, 286. This approach has been mirrored in recent scholarship on political violence and insurgent groups, see Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (London: Cornell University Press, 2014).

[84] This use of 'will' takes inspiration from Eva Brann, *Un-Willing: An Inquiry into the Rise of Will's Power and an Attempt to Undo It* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2014).

overly mechanistic structuralism and the reduction of 'subjective' factors to 'frames,' 'repertoires' and 'discursive opportunities,' etc. i.e. to just another structure or distinct mode of action. These issues feed into an emphasis on deliberate calculated acts, cast in terms of a ubiquitous instrumentality which also brackets off key questions regarding the origins of actors' identities, interests and perceptual schemas of interpretation. The model of agency that emerges does not do justice to either structure or agency.[85].

By contrast, Bourdieu makes the agent-structure problem the foundation of his sociology. His theory of practice deploys the concepts of habitus and field to account for the way in which the structures of social reality become instantiated in human subjectivity (habitus) via the reiterative aspect of social action (practices) within particular structuring contexts (fields). As Dreyfus writes:

> Bourdieu sees that our practices embody pervasive responses, discriminations, motor skills, etc., which add up to an interpretation of what it is to be a person, an object, an institution, etc…Such an understanding is contained in our knowing-how-to-cope in various domains [or fields] rather than in a set of beliefs that such and such is the case. Thus, we embody an understanding of being that no one has in mind.[86]

For Bourdieu, then, this understanding of being is not cognitively-held by the individual, but intersubjectively instantiated in the web of social practices that contain this ontology. Here, Bourdieu is drawing on Heidegger's dissolving of the transcendental ego as the ultimate ground for consciousness and meaning. Instead, it is fields of shared practices and their instantiation in habitus that function as, in Bourdieu's words, 'the precondition for all objectification and apperception.'[87]

This social way of being is, for Bourdieu (again, heavily influenced by Heidegger), to be engaged in self-interpreting activity, meaning that social action is ultimately generative of the structures that inscribe it with meaning because it is always participating in, and reproducing, hierarchies of value. Bourdieu represents this *valuing* quality inherent to social action with his concept of social capitals. Capitals, in their most fundamental sense, are social relations of power that coalesce around what a given practice takes as its object of value which thus becomes an object of social struggle. A field of practice is a competitive arena that is organised around the social action that defines and accumulates particular forms of capital. The routinisation of practices generates the norms, implicit and explicit

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[85] Crossley, *Making Sense,* 170.
[86] Hurbert L. Dreyfus, *Being-In-The-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division 1* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 17-18.
[87] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 86.

rules, networks and institutional arrangements, signifiers and narratives, that characterise a particular field.[88] The distribution of capitals therefore locates actors in objective relations of power, a matrix of relational positions that constitutes the structure of a field and makes it an empowered, structuring and meaning-giving context for social action. In essence, a field's practice contains a pre-theoretical, intersubjectively held and inherently normative interpretation of what it means to be an actor oriented toward the accumulation of that field's forms of capital (e.g., an intellectual, a cleric, a paramilitary fighter etc.).

Four generic types of capital are: economic (money and property); cultural (education, training goods, services and credentials); social (networks and social ties); and symbolic (legitimation).[89] However, in reality, as outlined above, there will be as many forms of capital as there are fields of practice, and the definition and value of particular forms of capital is a central feature of field struggles. For instance, struggles over coercive capital that belongs to the field of violence has been an important element of Sadrist practices. Capitals are acquired through social action, but can be embodied, objectified or institutionalised. Technical expertise in jihadi operations is embodied capital; weapons, real estate and money are objectified capital; the *hawza*, which confers forms of social, cultural and symbolic capital, is institutionalised. Thus, while some forms of capital are acquired simply by physical acquisition of the object, others are acquired only via participation in particular institutions, or via the slow accumulation of knowledge and experience through recurrent practice, or social ties acquired via routinised social interactions.

Social action for Bourdieu emerges from the interaction an actor's habitus and forms of capital when these become engaged in the particular structuring contexts of social fields. Swartz summarises this dynamic in the following terms: 'Practices occur when habitus encounters those competitive arenas called fields, and action reflects the structure of that encounter.'[90] This means practice is not reducible to either the historical conditions reflected in habitus, or the present conditions reflected in a particular field structure, but, rather, 'grows out of the "interrelationship" established at each point in time by the sets of relations represented by both.'[91] These structures contain deeply-sedimented knowledge, cultural norms and precepts, internalised systems of domination, control and resistance, and,

[88] Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation,* 118.
[89] David Swartz, *Culture & Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 78-82.
[90] Swartz, *Culture & Power,* 141.
[91] Swartz, *Culture & Power,* 142.

ultimately, an understanding of ways of being that are rarely, and never fully, articulated in ideational or propositional mental representations. Thus, this theory connects action to culture, structure and power at the level of a social ontology contained in self-interpreting social action.

These analytical concepts are deployed here as a framework to unpack the strategic politics of social movements. Habitus helps to conceptualise and reconstruct the social embeddedness of agents engaged in movement politics. This view offers an escape from the pervasive instrumentality of social movement analyses explored above. Crossley, for instance, argues that in social movement mobilisations:

> [a]gents act, think, reflect, desire, perceive, make sense, etc. but they always do so by way of habitus inherited from the social locations in which they have socialised, which are in turn, shaped by wider dynamics of the social world. It is for this reason that specific frames can be resonant or not, and that some hardships will count as grievances or strains for some groups, where others may not.[92]

However, habitus also offers a way of theorising the effects of much broader, historical processes and relations of power and how these become sedimented in actors' pre-theoretical understanding of themselves as agents. For instance, it becomes possible to think of such historical forces as modernity in terms of their instantiation via habitus as a particular pre-theoretical understanding of what it means to human, or a political actor, that is not necessarily cashed out in abstract terms. These processes cannot be disconnected from an historical account of the formation of political subjects.

Bourdieu's theory also allows for a deeper examination of the social terrain upon which movements grow, and within which they remain engaged. Rather than viewing this as a neutral social space, a practice-based approach disaggregates the polity into competitive arenas of social struggle contained in distinct fields of practice. Movement actors are thus engaged in the social world via different structuring contexts, giving rise to contrasting pathways of socialisation, the accumulation of different combinations of social capital and, ultimately, contrasting political perspectives and worldviews. However, on a more fundamental level than these acknowledged and explicit divergences in political outlooks, social movement participants are, via their participation in distinct fields of practice, engaged in multiple 'social games,' which are partially overlapping but not coterminous. These social games structure actors' strategic practices according to their implicit as well as explicit rules or social logics. There are games that belong to particular fields of practice

[92] Crossley, *Making Sense,* 175.

(e.g. intellectual or clerical games); and there is the game that is specific to a movement itself (e.g. the civil trend game or the Sadrist game).[93] The strategic politics of social movements depends on how these games playout through a process of intra-movement contestation.

The social ontology outlined here also brings different types of movement resources into a unified analytical framework. It recognises that while agents, in some circumstances, relate to capitals more as objectified tools (i.e., instrumentally), others manifest as embodied aspects of a human subject (they are non-alienable elements of embodied experience). This means that resources have greater explanatory power for social action. They are not merely the tools of strategic practices; they also define where an actor is located in social relations of power and how the actor relates to the social world and to other actors. In other words, resources become part of the theoretical account of how an actor is constituted as an agent with particular orientations and schemas of interpretation at a given location in social space. Social capitals also structure relations of power *between* movement actors, shaping movement hierarchies and regulating access to the movement resources. Thus, intra-movement conflicts over divergent strategic perspectives, are, in this view, also struggles amongst different strata of these movements to assert the preeminence of particular forms of capital in the movement's distinct social field.

The strategic politics of social movements as a whole relates to this intra-movement contestation of these competing strategic perspectives and practices. Precisely how this contestation is cashed in collective political behaviour depends primarily on the social and organisational structures of a movement.[94] Here, factors such as the degree of social embeddedness between movement strata, of institutionalisation of authority, of hierarchic integration, of formalisation of internal rules and process are all important intervening variables that determine how the social game particular to a movement plays out in its strategic political behaviour. For instance, two movement's that a similarly dispersed across multiple social fields, and are thus characterised by a similar degree of internal ideological heterogeneity, will not necessarily exhibit the same degree of instability in their strategic

[93] Social movements function as fields in the sense that they are organised around forms of capital that are particular to the movement and structure relations of power between movement actors. For instance, the 'civil trend game' focuses on the struggle to define, accumulate and deploy the symbolic capital of the Iraqi intelligentsia focused on al-Mutanabbi Street; the 'Sadrist game' focuses on the symbolic capital of Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr.
[94] Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (London: Cornell University Press, 2014).

politics. This is because one movement may have a highly institutionalised and rule-bound structure of authority and decision-making process (e.g. the ICP); while the other may have a more personalised mode of authority and weak horizontal social linkages between its leadership strata (e.g. the Sadr movement).

### *Situational Logics and Desectorisation*

Habitus and field each indicate a particular social tempo and foreground different time frames within which to consider the behaviour of social movement actors. A third time frame is captured by French sociologist Michel Dobry's concept of situational logics. If habitus and field emphasise what is durable about social structures, situational logics draw attention to the plasticity of structures and their sensitivity to reformulation during systemic social crises and the tactical actions adopted by social movement actors during critical events. This thesis brings in Dobry's conceptual schema in order to investigate the socio-structural substrate to the strategic perspective which social movement actors experience as a greater contingency in social relations during episodes of social crisis.

In Dobry's formulation, situational logics refer to 'systems of constraints' that 'impose themselves on the perceptions, anticipations, calculations, and practices of actors who act in the "event" thereby shaping it.'[95] Thus, like habitus and field, a situational logic is a generative and empowered structure created by action. However, its analytical purpose is to draw attention to what critical events and processes are made of, what actually *happens* during such events, and how their structuring logics can gain a degree of autonomy from the conditions of its emergence (field structures).[96]

What Dobry calls desectorisation describes a type of situational logic that pertains during social crises characterised by multi-sector mobilisations ('competitive mobilizations that are localised simultaneously in several social spheres').[97] Thus, Dobry argues that:

> [D]esectorisation is tangible in the collapse of sectoral borders, in the increasing permeability to tactical actions and to stakes that are external to the local social logics [and] the end of the closure of enclaves of arenas of competition and regulation to the different social sectors or fields (for instance parliamentary arenas).[98]

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[95] Michel Dobry, 'Critical Processes and Political Fluidity: A Theoretical Appraisal,' *International Political Anthropology* 2, no. 1 (2009): 5.
[96] Dobry, *'Critical Processes'*: 8.
[97] Dobry, *'Critical Processes'*: 7.
[98] Dobry, *'Critical Processes'*: 7.

The effects of this increased permeability in sectoral boundaries is a mobility of social stakes, i.e. attempts to bring forms of authority, legitimation and valued resources that normally belong to a particular social sector to bear in another, testing and contesting the social logics around which these sectors have been organised. As Dobry writes, 'the mobility of stakes – so disconcerting both for the protagonists of such crises and for their observers – that can be sensed in these situations, stems, to a large extent, from the loosening of the strong connection which, during routine conjunctures, underpins the relationships between certain sectoral arenas and certain types of stakes.'[99]

Desectorisation allows for new forms of social action that breach previously compartmentalised social logics. These prevailing social logics suffer a 'loss of objectivity' for actors who no longer take for granted the implicit boundaries and definitions sectoral logics impose on social action. The nature of the challenge to power entailed by multi-sector mobilisations, then, does not lie primarily in their greater capacity to mobilise material resources and to aggregate protesters into larger social formations, but in the more fundamental sense of an unmooring of the sources of authority and legitimation around which the social and political system is organised. These sites of power are subject to radical reconfiguration (radical, here, meaning literally the way in which this challenge goes to the roots of these systems). By way of example, this thesis will link the Sadr movement's messianic-militancy post-2003 to socio-structural conditions of desectorisation engendered by the US-led invasion.[100]

This view of desectorisation provides a way for thinking about social movements and strategic politics that refocuses attention on the structural conditions of social crises. Rather than a view of strategic agency and rationality as eluding determining structures during critical episodes, this conceptual regards the 'strategic perspective' on social relations as a phenomenological experience with a socio-structural correlate. That is, the disruption of routine relations is experienced subjectively as a 'stepping back' from engaged social situatedness and as an increased contingency in social reality and its permeability to tactical and instrumental action. Nevertheless, this subjectively held experience of social distancing is a function of underlying structural conditions. This view points to an underlying compatibilist conception of free will that rejects the notion of mind-material duality, and of the coherence of a concept of reason as autonomous from structures (of mind, materiality

[99] Dobry, *'Critical Processes'*: 7.
[100] See chapter three.

or social reality). Rational action, in this view, can only be understood from the perspective of the structuring context which provides its ultimate teleology.

## V
## Conclusion

This chapter began by discussing the literature on social movements and popular politics in Iraq, highlighting the distortions of these phenomena as a result of the types of analytical lenses that have been brought to bear on the country, particularly since 2003. Similarly, the country's Islamist movements have rarely been considered within broader comparative literatures exploring transformations in Islamist politics. Bringing Iraq back into dialogue with social and political sciences, and particularly recent comparative literature on popular politics and the Arab Spring can help to clarify some of these distortions. In particular, the popular PPT/DOC approach has been used to bring the rational, agential, nonelite and ideological aspects back into the frame. These have all been largely missing from analyses of social movements and popular politics in Iraq.

However, PPT/DOC present theoretical problems rooted in the model's lack of an underlying social ontology which struggles to integrate a thick description of history and context and tends to a highly instrumental model of agency. Moreover, a tendency to look away from social structures that are operative in, and during, critical episodes has obscured the importance of relatively autonomous social logics that are particular to social crises and which shape the strategic politics of social movements. A practice-oriented approach inspired by Bourdieu provides an integrative social ontology that can bring both layers of social action, the tactical and instrumental and the habitual and dispositional, within a single coherent framework. It also allows for the social terrain on which social movements grow to be unpacked as a differentiated and historically constituted structuring context which shapes intra-movement struggles to define and shape their strategic politics. Meanwhile, Dobry's theory of situational logics and desectorisation elucidates the socio-structural substrate entailed by systemic social crisis that generates a 'strategic perspective' on social reality and a degree of autonomy from the more enduring structures of social fields.

# CHAPTER TWO
# LEFTIST-ISLAMIST SOCIAL MOVEMENT POLITICS IN PRE-INVASION IRAQ

## I
## Introduction

This chapter provides an historical perspective on Iraq's leftist and Islamist social movement politics in the decades preceding the Anglo-American invasion in 2003. It argues that the post-invasion political behaviour of the Iraqi left and Islamist movements, including the Sadr movement, cannot be separated from historical forces and social processes that are deeply rooted in Iraq's modern history. This chapter, therefore, identifies the social conditions which gave rise to new collective political actors and modes of political action in Iraq during the 20th century. The rise of ideological politics, mass political movements and Islamist trends – and their various engagements in formal politics, clandestine and violent "resistance" and religious mobilisation – are the focus of this analysis. These new phenomena in Iraq were shaped by broad and overlapping historical forces and their accompanying structures of thought and subjectivity: modernity; colonialism; integration into global markets; and modern state formation. However, by zooming in from these overarching historical factors to address the particular social bases and institutional arrangements of the ICP and the Sadr movement in the 1990s, this chapter also starts to fill the explanatory gap between the conditions that explain the emergence of new political actors and their political practices.

The emphasis in this chapter is less on presenting new historical information about the period and movements under discussion, and more on placing the existing historical record in a particular conceptual arrangement that functions as the foundation for subsequent chapters (when original primary research becomes the focus). This existing historical record, particularly with respect to the ICP and leftist politics, has been dealt with most prominently by Hanna Batatu, Tareq Y. Ismael and Johan Franzén.[1] Points of contrast and,

[1] Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (London: Saqi Books, 1978); Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

in some limited instances, disagreement, between the present work and Ismael's and Franzén's monographs are dealt with in later chapters. However, it is Batatu's study – *The Old Social Classes and Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* – that is both the most exhaustive in terms of empirical detail and the most explicitly theoretical of the three studies. For this latter reason, in particular, it is also the most important for comparison at this stage.

As will become clear, this chapter is primarily interested in how Iraq's engagement in modernity generated new patterns of social stratification that, in turn, formed the basis for the emergence of new political subjects and modes of action. Batatu's analysis is similarly interested in this dynamic and its political effects. He regards these, according to a Marxist class analysis, as based in a transformation in patterns of ownership of private property and in social relations of production. Thus, Batatu highlights the transition from the period of Mamluk rule in Iraq, wherein property and class were 'secondary phenomena,' to a situation by the 1930s and 1940s wherein these started to emerge as the basis for communal action. As Batatu writes, what emerged was '"a class for itself," that is… a distinct, politically self-conscious group'.[2] This transition, Batatu argues, was a function primarily, if not overwhelmingly, of Iraq's integration into global markets.[3]

The extent to which Batatu's class categories and their boundaries reflected empirical reality, or sufficiently explained the political behaviour of their members, has been questioned, for instance, by Elie Kedourie.[4] However, Kedourie's critique is one that is frequently applied to Marxist analyses and is by no means exclusive to Batatu's work. Most relevant to this thesis, is the critique of Marxist class analysis found in Bourdieu's sociology which focuses on precisely the issues raised by Kedourie, namely, the definition of class boundaries and how a 'logical class' manifests as a concrete political actor.

Consistent with the broader interests of his sociology, Bourdieu's response to these questions is to focus on symbolic as well as material factors and to make 'classification struggles,' i.e. the power to define class boundaries, the central focus of his analysis. Since, for Bourdieu, 'class is defined as much by its *being-perceived* as be its *being,*'[5] his concept

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2008) & Johan Franzén, *Red Star Over Iraq: Iraqi Communism Before Saddam* (London: Hurst and Company, 2011).
[2] Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 11.
[3] Batatu, *The Old Social Classes,* 11; 1113.
[4] Elie Kedourie, Review of Hannah Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and Revolutionary Movements of Iraq,* in *Political Studies*, Vol.28 No. 3:488.
[5] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984), 483.

of class entails more attention to the symbolic labour of intellectuals in bringing classes into existence as conscious actors. This means class boundaries are not entirely given by economic relations but are the principal object of social struggle both within and across class stratifications. Moreover, Bourdieu's theory of habitus and field fills some of the explanatory gap between the 'class on paper' and the political behaviours of actually existing individuals and groups. In this view, these behaviours do not flow directly from an actor's economic position but are mediated by their situation within highly differentiated fields of practice.[6]

In other words, the political interests and orientations attendant to a particular class are always modulated through the social fields in which practices unfold and via their implicit and practical forms of knowledge by which actors navigate the social world. The influence of this approach on the present work is seen in this chapter, where the emergence of new political actors and their political strategies are related primarily to the genesis of particular social fields and to the labour of symbolic practices. This is in addition to broader economic transformations and their effects on social stratification. Thus, in this view, the effects of modernity on the emergence in Iraq of new political subjects and modes of action are related to the diversification of markets in symbolic capital as much as to transformations in the distribution of private property and social relations of production (which Batatu considers primary).

Batatu's *The Old Social Classes* has also been criticised for its lack of attention the Shi'a Islamist factor (of central importance to this thesis). Ali Allawi, for instance, writes that Batatu, 'simply ignored the evolution of the Islamic movement.'[7] Allawi's criticism carries some weight and this gap in Batatu's analysis opened up a space in scholarship which Faleh Abd al-Jabar to Yitzhak Nakash would later address with two widely-cited monographs on Iraqi Shi'is and the Shi'i Islamist movement during the 20th century.

However, it is also worth noting that Batatu himself sought to contribute to this literature, publishing an article on Iraq's 'underground Shi'a movements' in 1981 for *The Middle East Journal.* This article has some idiosyncratic arguments, most notably, that Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr had no ties whatsoever to the Islamic Da'wa Party[8] (a position later

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[6] David Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 146.
[7] Ali Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Wining the War, Losing the Peace* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 37.
[8] Hanna Batatu, 'Iraq's Underground Shī'a Movements: Characteristics, Causes and Prospects', *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Autumn, 1981): 589; 590.

contradicted by Falah Abd al-Jabar).[9] Batatu was also sceptical about the ability of Iraq's Shi'i Islamist movement to emerge as a major political force, regarding it as too internally divided and ultimately tied up to the fate of the Iranian regime.[10] What his analysis did not foresee, therefore, was the potential for Iraq's Shi'i religious field to act as the social terrain of emergence for a new mode of religious mobilisation oriented against the established clerical hierarchies in both Najaf and Qom. It would also position itself as a distinctly Iraqi movement with loose, and often antagonistic, relations with the exiled Iraqi opposition that developed closer ties to the Iranian state. However, it was precisely this 'internal opposition,' the religious movement of Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr of the 1990s, that, by the time of the 2003 invasion, would overwhelm and largely displace secular ideologies and movements as the primary political force amongst Iraq's marginalized Shi'a population.

## II
## The Left and Shiʿi Islamism in Iraq: The State Formation Period

The relationship between leftist and Islamist social movements during the pre-2003 phase of Iraq's modern history has been characterised in the main by mutual antagonism and conflict.[11] The historical forces of European modernity, the formation of a modern state and Iraq's integration into global markets all combined to create new spheres of action with distinct modes of politics. These emerged to contest the previously central role of the Shiʿi religious field in the political and ideological organisation of Iraq's Shiʿi population. Shiʿi Islamism, in turn, emerged not merely as a strategic response to this threat, but as an attempt at the refoundation of the religious field's own structures, resources and modes of authority and legitimation in the terms laid down by the same modernity that had given rise to competing forms of identity, community and politics. Thus, the two movements were not external to each other, but shaped by similar historical forces and there was considerable interpenetration between the two movements in terms of social networks and ideological

[9] Faleh A. Jabar, *The Shiʿite Movement in Iraq* (Saqi: London, 2003), 78-94.
[10] Batatu, 'Iraq's Underground Shī'a Movements…': 594.
[11] One counter example to this general pattern is the case of Shaykh 'Abd al-Karim al-Mashata (1881-1959) who one of the founding members of Haraka Ansar al-Salam ('The Partisans of Peace Movement,') founded 15 July, 1954. Mashata has recently emerged as a figure of interest for Iraqi scholars because of his cooperation with leftist movements through Haraka Ansar al-Salam. He also wrote a book entitled *Al-Shuyu'iya La Tatsadam Ma' Islam* [Communism Does not Clash With Islam].

influences. These proximities, however, further intensified dynamics of social struggle, as the two movements came to compete over similar social terrain and resources.

### *The Rise of Ideological Politics: The Intelligentsia, the ICP and the Hawza*

The emergence and growth of the ICP in the 1920s and 1930s was linked to historical conditions giving rise to an Iraqi intellectual class engaged in the then-novel practice of ideology-based party politics. It was this lower and middle-class intelligentsia that came to dominate and shape the politics of the ICP.[12] Thus, the factors which explain the emergence of this social stratum and which shaped its social and ideological characteristics, particularly on matters of religion and political Islam, are essential to explain the politics of the ICP and its fractious relationship with Iraq's Shiʿi religious actors and Islamist movements. At the heart of this antagonism was a process of complexification in Iraqi civil society – a central dynamic of the country's interaction with modernity – which led to greater contestation of the religious field's role in symbolic markets, intellectual production and the political organisation of social bases in central and southern Iraq.

Prior to this encounter with modernity, intellectual production in Iraq was limited to mosques and traditional religious schools.[13] The Shiʿi madrasas not only trained experts in religious law, but were also where Arabic literary figures and poets acquired their craft. Such luminaries of Iraq's 20th century literati as Muhammad Rida al-Shabibi, Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahairi and 'Ali al-Sharqi all gained at least part of their education in the madrasas.[14] The religious institutions of Najaf and Karbala also functioned as the site of political mobilisation and organisation in the Shiʿi south. Yitzhak Nakash, for example, describes the *majālis* or *dawāwīn* – discussion sessions during which students and ʿulamaʾ would debate religious, literary and socio-political issues – as the 'soul of Najaf'. The strategies formulated in these sessions, he argues, 'laid the basis for political action in such episodes as Najaf's 1918 revolt and the 1920 revolt in Iraq.'[15] Thus, religious institutions and actors played a central role not only in how these crucial events unfolded, but also in how they were symbolically represented and interpreted.

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[12] Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (London: Saqi Books, 2004), 644.
[13] Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (London: University of California Press, 2003), 31.
[14] Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shiʿis of Iraq* (Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 1994), 245-245.
[15] Nakash, *The Shiʿis,* 246.

This role was transformed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as new forms of politics and their attendant modes of authority and legitimation emerged from spaces for social action outside the religious field. The seeds of this transformation can be traced to the Ottoman encounter with European power and the consequent efforts by the empire to reshape the Ottoman state along European lines. As Charles Tripp has noted, this entailed an effort to 'reconstruct the administrative, legislative, educational and resource bases of the state,' the effects of which would gradually make themselves felt on the empire's Mesopotamian periphery.[16] Military reforms and the absorption of Iraqi Arabs (mostly Sunnis) into the Ottoman officer corps encouraged the transmission of European political thought (republicanism and constitutionalism) to Iraq.[17] Meanwhile, new policies in education influenced the creation of the first non-religious institutions of intellectual production and new ways of thinking about politics. The emergence of the modern state itself also created new social roles and strata associated with its particular technologies of administrative, legal and political power. Thus, as Tripp argues, a new form of political community began to take shape with 'the rules (and languages) of a new kind of politics… to regulate power and to define authority and administrative duty.'[18]

It was also initially through the Ottoman Empire and its refashioning of state power that Iraq was integrated into global economic markets from the mid-19th century. This led to an increase in trade that brought Iraq into closer intellectual contact with Europe. It also led to the dislocation of tribal-rural patterns of social and economic life and a gradual dissolving of their economic and symbolic structures. Moreover, rural-urban migration led to the growth of towns where Iraqis interacted with more diverse social strata, eroding established social hierarchies and contributing to a process of atomisation as they lost ties to previous forms of communal organisation. These conditions provided the social terrain for the growth of new forms of nationalist politics. Eric Davis, in particular, has argued for the significance of these economic forces in shaping new forms of political identity and in creating 'the preconditions for the emergence of new structures of thought, particularly those that transcended regional, local, and ethnic identities.'[19] In other words, the foundations for a new era of secular ideological politics cast in the terms of a systematising, rationalising and universalising modernity.

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[16] Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 14.
[17] Davis, *Memories of State*, 32-33.
[18] Tripp, *A History,* 14-15.
[19] Davis, *Memories of State,* 30.

These same economic processes also disrupted what Nakash has described as 'the massive socioeconomic and religious interaction' between the tribes and the Shiʿi religious establishment in Najaf and Karbala.' These shrine cities had acted as the 'nerve centre' for social relationships that bound Shiʿi elites and masses, rural tribes and urban elements, in a complex web of economic and symbolic interactions.[20] These relationships functioned as the basis for what Nakash describes as process of Shiʿi state-building in southern Iraq, led by the Shiʿi mujtahids who theorised a central political role for themselves in a Shiʿi Islamic state.[21] However, this state-formation process, anchored in the Shiʿi religious field, was gradually undercut by the fragmentation of its underlying social relationships and accompanying economic decline in revenues from rituals and religious taxes.[22]

These processes were accelerated and shaped by the profound ruptures and changes wrought by the outbreak of war in 1914. The subsequent Ottoman collapse and British occupation and mandate of Iraq prompted searching questions about the bases for political community and forms of collective identity in the empire's former Mesopotamian provinces.[23] Meanwhile, the defeat of the Shiʿi religious-rural-tribal alliance at the heart of the 1920 revolt accelerated the declining influence of these social strata and constrained their role in the future political contestation of the emerging state.[24] This influence passed instead to other groups, including the urban Sunni notables and military officers who went on to exert an outsized influence over the monarchical state and its associated forms of political identity and community. Thus, the rise of the modern state in Iraq was bound up in a process of displacement of Shiʿi religious power and distinct forms of community.[25]

This was seen especially in the education sector which further expanded under the monarchy with the College of Law reopening in 1920-21 and the College of Education being founded in 1923. The 1930s saw the further establishment of colleges for medicine and pharmacy. The Iraqi state also started sending teachers abroad for training. Meanwhile, the expansion of secondary and higher education was accompanied by the growth in student organisations and clubs stimulating civic consciousness and political activity amongst the urban middle class.[26] Education policy was used by the Sunni elite to undermine the

[20] Nakash, *The Shiʿis,* 5.
[21] Nakash, *The Shiʿis,* 5.
[22] Nakash, *The Shiʿis,* 205-268.
[23] Tripp, *A History of Iraq,* 39-44.
[24] Tripp, *A History of Iraq,* 44.
[25] Nakash, *The Shiʿis,* 75-88.
[26] Davis, *Memories of State,* 72.

influence of the madrasas amongst the Shiʿi population and encourage the spread of pan-Arabism (promoted by politicians such as Sati' al-Husri), supposedly as an alternative form of political community to Shiʿi 'sectarian' affiliation.[27]

Cultural markets, and the social roles associated with the production of symbolic capital, were thus becoming increasingly diversified and differentiated. As new and distinct cultural fields consolidated they also acquired their own institutional and technological apparatus: political parties; the proliferation of printing presses that facilitated the publication of newspapers and journals; trade unions and 'clubs' that provided professional associations; universities that offered training in secular and humanistic sciences; and the coffee houses and intellectual salons of Baghdad. The Shiʿi *hawza*'s preeminent role in the ideological and political organisation of the emerging Shiʿi middle classes was thus increasingly contested by new fields of symbolic production that drew on new forms of legitimacy and authority not rooted in the metaphysical modes of the religious field but in the particular ideological modes of modernity. Thus, from the 1920s onwards new forms of intellectual practice in Iraq encompassed journalists such as Rufa'i Butti, nationalist thinkers such as Sati' al-Hursi, Fadil al-Jamali and Kamil al-Chadirji, communists such as Yusuf Salman Yusif (Comrade Fahad, who became Secretary General of the ICP in the 1940s), and military officers such as Salah al-Din al-Sabbagh, all of whom produced highly influential political writing.[28]

The communists were particularly well-represented amongst the Shiʿi urban middle class, particularly students and those in the new educational vocations.[29] The radical leftist thought and activism that emerged from this social context initially took on an explicitly anti-religious tone as they challenged the monopoly of clerics over the production of symbolic capital and, later, over the political organisation of the Iraqi Shiʿa. In the early 1920s, Husayn al-Rahhal formed Mutadarisi al-Afkar al-Hurrah ('The Students of Independent Ideas'), the first Marxist study circle in Iraq. The group's paper, al-Sahafa ('The Journal'), was shut down by the authorities for its strident attacks on religion.[30] Meanwhile, in the late 1920s, communist activity centred on an al-Hizb al-Hurr al-Ladini (The Free Irreligious Party).[31] However, this early anti-religious propaganda had a counter-productive effect, strengthening the position of the Shiʿi ʿulamaʾ and alienating the religiously-minded

[27] Nakash, *The Shiʿis,* 250.
[28] Davis, *Memories of State,* 42.
[29] Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 644-645.
[30] Johan Franzén, *Red Star Over Iraq: Iraqi Communism Before Saddam* (London: Hurst and Company, 2011), 34.
[31] Franzén, *Red Star*, 34-35.

populace. By the 1930s, the communists had entirely abandoned open attacks on religion and steered clear of the religious question for strategic purposes, reflecting their relative weakness at that time.[32]

By the 1940s, for reasons outlined above, this balance of power was beginning to shift in quite marked ways. Thus, while an alliance between the Shiʿi ʿulamaʾ and tribal groupings had been at the heart of the 1920 revolt, these forces were notably more absent from important episodes of popular politics and mass street demonstrations that occurred in 1948 (al-Wathbah*,* 'The Leap'), and 1952 (al-Intifada, 'The Uprising'). Both episodes brought together elements in the emerging bourgeoisie and middle classes with the urban poor and working class in Baghdad. Their joint participation in protests which contested political power thus also fashioned new forms of national consciousness and political identity.[33] The social terrain for the emergence of these mobilisations was that of the new domains of action for secular intellectual activity outlined above. Thus, as Orit Bashkin has argued, the students and their allies who triggered the protests in Baghdad were also 'the readers of the leftist and nationalist press, the clients of the cafes and clubs, and the members of the communist and nationalist cells.' The performative dimension of the demonstrations reflected the new political modes of the nationalist and communist currents and their distinctly modern forms of authority and legitimation that made no claims on the religious field.[34]

The 1958 revolution, and the period of the 'Abd al-Karim Qasim regime (1958-1963) accelerated these dynamics, coming to signify the high-water mark of communist power in Iraq.[35] Following the successful putting down of the Nasserist-Arab nationalist uprising in Mosul in 1959, the ICP came to provide the bulk of Qasim's organisational and ideological support.[36] Their influence manifest in radical economic reforms, such as the abolition of the Tribal Disputes Act, the appropriation of land from the aristocratic classes and the enactment of a new family law and civil code. These were accompanied by the growth of

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[32] Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 695.
[33] Batatu, *The Old Social Classes,* 545-566.
[34] Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 118-119.
[35] Charles Tripp argues that: 'The ICP, under Hasain al-Radi, emerged in 1958 as the best-organised party in the country, with a clear structure and solid foundations in Iraqi urban society and among the peasantry of the south, as well as in the northern Kurdish region…Its focus on the evils of social injustice, economic exploitation and questions of wages and conditions of work won the ICP a wide basis of support and made it the leading party of social reform.' See, Tripp, *A History of Iraq,* 148-149.
[36] Franzén, *Red Star,* 103.

workers' unions and women's and students' leagues.[37] The ICP had arisen to the status of one of the most powerful modern ideological movements in the Arab world.

The revolution thus furthered the decline of the old social classes, including the clerical class, while handing power decisively to the new middle class and their modern ideologies and, particularly in the case of the communists, forms of mass politics that engaged the urban poor on a huge scale.[38] The left's new cultural and political power was felt even in Najaf. By the 1940s, the city was host to communist cells, literary salons, newspapers, and labour and student organisations. When the ICP organised mass protests in 1956, in response to the signing of the Baghdad Pact, the demonstrations in Najaf were amongst the largest in the country.[39] Literary figures and poets, such as Husayn Muruwa, Muhammad Salih Bahr al-'Ulum and Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri, who had undergone their Arabic language training in the Shiʿi madrasas, rejected their own clerical family backgrounds in favour of political activism with the ICP.[40] Even family members of the Shiʿi ʿulamaʾ in Najaf were being lost to leftist and communistic ideologies.[41]

Communism had thus become an existential threat to the *hawza* which was decisively losing its status as the principal force in the ideological and political organisation of the Iraqi Shiʿa. Responding to these profoundly disturbing trends, the ʿulamaʾ made clear that the radical laws being promulgated by the Qasim regime and its communist allies contravened the shariʿa. In 1959, the Najaf-based *marja'* Ayatollah Mushin al-Ṭabatabaʾi al-Ḥakim issued his now-infamous fatwas declaring membership of the ICP religiously prohibited on account of the movement's propagation of atheism. This would have an enduring, pernicious effect in Shiʿi Islamist-leftist relations in later years, buttressing ideological distinctions and political opposition between the two movements.

[37] Faleh A. Jabar, *The Shiʿite Movement in Iraq* (London: Saqi, 2003), 75.
[38] Jabar, *The Shiʿite Movement*, 75.
[39] Rachel Kantz Feder, 'Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and the Foundations of Revivalism and Modernization in Shiʿism, 1946-1980,' (PhD diss., The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle East and African Studies, 2017), 67.
[40] Feder, *Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr*, 64.
[41] Silvia Naef, 'Shīʿī-shuyūʿī or: How to Become a Communist in a Holy City,' in *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times: Religious Culture and Political History*, eds. Rainer Brunner and Werner Ende (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 255-267.

### *Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and the Emergence of Iraq's Shiʿi Islamist Movement*

Shiʿi Islamist movements have been characterised as more leftist in ideological orientation than their Sunni counterparts. However, this is not because leftist instincts are somehow inscribed in the DNA, or 'soul' of Shiʿism.[42] Rather, it was a function of the particular sociological conditions in which Shiʿi Islamist movements emerged in the 20th century. Both Iran and Iraq were home to two of the region's most powerful communist movements: the Tudeh Party and the ICP respectively. Both movements fashioned a powerful legacy, shaping the intellectual milieu and cultural horizons in their respective countries, augmented by their role in anti-imperialist and national liberation struggles. One implication of this influence was a greater engagement by Islamist intellectuals in these two countries in developing syncretic ideologies (e.g. 'Ali Shariati in Iran, and Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr in Iraq).[43]

At the same time, the sociological distance separating the Shiʿi 'ʿulamaʾ from the Islamist lay activist and intellectual strata of these movements was less pronounced. Compared with the Sunni 'ʿulamaʾ, Shiʿi clerical authority was less institutionalised and more personalised. It functioned, in the first instance, via the *ḥāshiyya,* the entourage of the ayatollah composed of his immediate family (primarily his sons). It was not uncommon for an ayatollah's sons to receive secular, even Western education, allowing them to play the role of mediators between the ayatollah and the profane world, particularly on political matters. Consequently, as Oliver Roy has argued, there was greater interpenetration between clerical and lay activist (political and intellectual) networks in Shiʿi Islamist movements.[44] This brought the intellectual and cultural forms of new fields of ideological and political action into the heart of the religious domain.

These factors played out in distinct ways through the crisis in Iraq's Shiʿi religious field and the emergence the Shiʿi Islamist movement in the 1950s which this crisis precipitated. The central figure in these developments was Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. Sadr undertook his early scholarly training at Shaykh Muhammad Rida al-Muzaffar's Muntada al-Nashr, a reformist madrasa founded in 1935. This school was a manifestation of a reformist

[42] Hamid Dabashi, *Shiʿism: A Religion of Protest* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).
[43] Aside from Sadr in Iraq, the 'Red Shiʿism' of Islamic-Marxist intellectual 'Ali Shariati,was shaped by strands of Third World Marxism and existentialism (Shariati was particularly influenced by Heidegger and Frantz Fanon).
[44] Oliver Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press)*,* 174-175.

current within the *hawza* that sought to cleave a middle-path between the 'outdated' traditional Shiʿi madrasas and the new secular schools associated with the modern Iraqi state.[45] Sadr was thus ensconced in the Islamic reformist movement and initiated his own project of educational reform shortly after his arrival in Najaf. The purpose of this project was to reconnect religious institutions with the emerging Shiʿi intelligentsia. Sadr even suggested that *hawza* students should only be admitted after having completed their education in the secular school system.[46]

In the late 1950s, Sadr sought to expand this intellectual and educational project to include a political dimension. He was, therefore, instrumental in the formation of Hizb al-Daʿwa al-Islamiyya (the Islamic Daʿwa Party). Al-Daʿwa was an altogether more radical and modern political movement than previous attempts at mobilisation in defense of the Najaf establishment, which had been more anchored in the religious field.[47] It was responding to the crisis of Shiʿi religiosity and religious institutions in the face of secular and leftist politics and cultural trends. It was, therefore, oriented primarily against Iraqi communism in both its ideology and political strategy. However, it also sought to take the fight to the left on the latter's social terrain, participating in the spheres of action wherein these new modes of politics where staking out positions of influence amongst the urban Shiʿi intelligentsia and political activists. Thus, Iraq's Shiʿi Islamism was profoundly shaped by structures of social organisation and thought that prevailed in these contexts.

In its social characteristics, al-Daʿwa initially reflected an alliance between less senior clerics and lay activists mainly from the Shiʿi mercantile families of Najaf.[48] This closed the socio-structural distance between this clerical stratum (mainly subordinate positions within the religious field) and the intellectual and cultural fields where leftist and Marxists currents predominated. Moreover, the division of labour between these two strata of al-Daʿwa (clerical versus lay), particularly after Sadr's withdrawal from active involvement in the movement and his retreat into the religious field, began the process of constructing distinctly political, as opposed to religious, discourses and modes of authority and legitimation. This reflected a structural factor of differentiation between these different

[45] Nakash, *The Shiʿis*, 262; also see, Feder, *Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr*
[46] Talib Aziz, 'The Political Theory of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr' in *Ayatollahs, Sufis, and Ideologues,* Faleh A. Jabar ed. (London: Saqi Books, 2002), 238.
[47] T. M. Aziz, 'The Role of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr in Shii Political Activism in Iraq from 1958 to 1980,' *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 25, no. 2 (May, 1993): 208.
[48] Jabar, *The Shiʿite Movement*, 95.

spheres of action to which these strata were primarily committed or excluded.[49] In this mode, Iraq's Shiʿi Islamist movement thus began developing new resources that acted as the foundation of its structures of authority and legitimation, and as the frameworks for apperception and articulation of identities, ideologies and forms of political community that were not rooted in the religious field.

Sadr did not restrict himself to the religious field either. Rather, he engaged in novel forms of ideological production, participating in practices that implicated him in the Iraqi intellectual field and its distinct modes of discourse and cultural technologies. This was an intellectual milieu shaped by the age of revolutionary politics and leftist cultural and political currents. Thus, contrary to those who posit a clear distinction between Islamic reformism and Marxism as two divergent paths to renewal and modernisation,[50] Ayatollah al-Sadr's reformist project was more syncretic, influenced by, and in dialogue with, Marxist intellectual currents.[51]

Moreover, in his major intellectual works (Falsafatuna and Iqtisaduna), Sadr was not engaged in a strictly religious action, but in the production of the forms of systematic and programmatic political ideology which, as a mode of practice, belonged properly to the intellectual field. In traversing these religion-intellectual boundaries, Sadr was highly atypical of normative clerical behaviour. His practices thus transformed the forms of social capital associated with a religious actor, introducing cultural (*muthaqaf*) and secular learning and knowledge and their attendant modes of authority and legitimation to the practice of clerical leadership. This mobilising of social stakes – in and out of the religious field – was disturbing to the more senior clerical hierarchy who applied considerable pressure on Sadr to abandon his intellectual and political endeavours and recommit himself to the normative practices of the religious field through seeking to ascend to the status of Grand Ayatollah. Nevertheless, his practice left a powerful influence on more junior clerical actors in the Shiʿi religious field (This genealogy of intellectual influence becomes important later in understanding the cultural and political perspectives of an older generation of Sadr movement clerics, see Chapter Three.)

Despite these ideological syncretisms and extra-religious modes of practice, Sadr's ideological and political project was directed towards a sustained critique of Marxist and

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[49] Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (London: Hurst & Co., 2008), 265.
[50] Take for example, Hasan al-'Alawi, *Al-Shiʿa wa al-Dawla al-Qawmiyya fi-al-'Iraq* (Paris: CEDI, 1989).
[51] Feder, *Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr*, 79.

socialist ideology. His positive political project was as much influenced by Rousseauian and liberal-constitutional trends, and indigenous intellectual currents such as Mu'tazili rationalism, as it was by revolutionary Marxist thought.[52] The political endpoint he posited, in Faleh Jabar's analysis, was a form of liberal-constitution hierocracy in which the right to govern and the juristic functions of the *faqīh* were separated and both subsumed to a constitutional mechanism.[53]

By contrast, as al-Daʿwa transitioned from a political movement to Islamist militancy (as a consolidating Baʿthist regime closed down spaces for political organisation), it became more radical in its diagnostic analysis and political strategies, reflecting a more Marxist orientation. Thus, 'reform' (*iṣlāḥiyya*) was rejected in favour of 'revolutionary change,' since the former would only address the 'super structures' (*al-buniyyāt al-fawqiyya*), leaving the deep-rooted structures intact.[54] Marxist influence could also be read into its call for 'social revolution' (albeit not one structured around class), and its vocabulary of struggle against 'social injustice.'[55] Nevertheless, as will be outlined below, the rise of the Baʿth Party and its particular practice of power would effectively prevent any form of effective cooperation between leftist and Islamist movements in resisting political domination.

## III
## The Baʿthist State, the ICP and the Intellectual and Religious Fields

Modernity for Iraq – that is, Iraq's integration into global markets and cultural relations of power, and the emergence of the modern nation state with its particular modes of political, administrative, legal, economic and social organisation – entailed a radical transformation of Iraqi society. This transformation has been described so far primarily in terms of a structural differentiation, or sectorisation, of Iraqi social space. This complexification of the social world is one of modernity's most distinguishing characteristics. Whereas previously the ʿulamaʾ hegemonized the social, ideological and political organisation of the Iraqi Shiʿa, modernity entailed the emergence of new social fields and specialised vocations, most notably the secular intelligentsia (teachers, academics, writers, journalists etc.), but also,

[52] Jabar, *The Shiʿite Movement*, 281.
[53] Jabar, *The Shiʿite Movement,* 281.
[54] Jabar, *The Shiʿite Movement*, 79.
[55] Hanna Batatu, 'Shiʿi Organizations in Iraq: Al-Da'wah al-Islamiyah and al-Mujahidin,' in *Shiʿism and Social Protest*, eds Juan R. I. Cole and Nikki R. Keddie (London: Yale University Press, 1986), 181.

later on, the Islamist lay intellectuals and political activists. These new groups competed with the religious field, creating new, fairly autonomous sites of social and political struggle, new institutional and organisational structures, new forms of social and political identity, new ideological frameworks and new modes of political authority and legitimacy.

This image of a complexified Iraqi socio-symbolic world stands in stark contrast to the notion of the all-consuming totalitarian one-party state that became popularly associated with the later development of the Baʿthist regime, particularly under Saddam Hussein's rule. Salam 'Aboud and Kanan Makiya, for example, both argued this regime was thoroughly totalitarian in nature, destroying or absorbing all independent elements of Iraqi civil society.[56] Eric Davis and Achim Rohde, by contrast, have challenged the applicability of 'totalitarian' as an analytical category in this context, seeking instead to present a more complex picture of the regime's hegemonic strategy, particularly its cultural dimension and the subtle forms of resistance that can occur even within the discursive apparatus of an authoritarian regime.[57]

Nevertheless, the process by which the Iraqi social landscape shifted from a state of structural differentiation to one of increasing integration is a broadly helpful way of describing the hegemonisation of the Baʿthist regime. However, within this broad pattern there was not a monological practice of power. Rather, the regime skilfully manipulated sectoral politics, deploying contrasting strategies in different contexts. Thus, in some cases the regime's practice of power was characterised by a logic of integration, while in others is deployed a form of 'sectoral quarantine' (socially isolating fields that thus remained fairly autonomous from the party-state). Moreover, particularly following the crises of the 1990s, the regime shifted from a broadly integrative strategy to a more disintegrative practice of power. This was entailed by its efforts to diversify and refoundation its sources of legitimacy. Of most interest here is how these different logics of power interacted with the Iraqi intellectual and religious fields in ways that shaped the future dynamics of leftist and Islamist politics in Iraq.

Iraqi politics also continued outside Iraq in the form of the exiled opposition. It was here, beyond the sectoral manipulations of the Baʿthist regime, that forms of leftist-Islamist ideological adaptation and political cooperation began to emerge. The two contexts, inside

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[56] Salam 'Aboud, *Thaqafa al'Unf fil'Iraq* (Koln: Al Kamel Verlag, 2002); and Kanan Makiya, *Republic of Fear* (London: University of California Press, 1998).
[57] Achim Rohde, *State-Society Relations in Ba'thist Iraq: Facing Dictatorship* (London: Routledge, 2010), 123-124; and Davis, *Memories of State*, 225-226.

and outside Iraq, produced distinct social movements that were also fairly isolated from each other. Thus, the changing patterns of strategic political behaviour that characterised the opposition in exile did not transpose onto relations between the Iraqi left and the Sadr movement which emerged inside Iraq during the 1990s. This too, would impact on leftist-Sadrist relations post-2003.

### *The Rise of the Baʿth Party and Sectoral Politics*

The rise of the Baʿth Party, which first came to power alongside ‘Abd al-Salem ‘Aref in the 1963 coup, but consolidated more fully following the coup in 1968, would present a dangerous new circumstance for both the ICP and Shiʿi religious and Islamist forces. In contrast to these groups, the Baʿth, who espoused pan-Arabist ideology, lacked a substantial social base in the country and drew its power mainly from the officer corps. Consolidating Baʿthist hegemony thus entailed a skilful manipulation of sectoral politics, playing competing political forces and social groups (Kurds, ʿulamaʾ, Shiʿi Islamists, communists etc.) against each other and circumventing the potential for cross-ideological or cross-sectarian/ethnic political coalition building.

The removal of ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim by the ‘Aref-Baʿthist coup in 1963 was a major blow for the ICP who had become Qasim’s principal source of ideological support and social organisation and now found themselves the main targets for repression. The new regime’s assault on the ICP may have cost up to 5,000 lives, and many of the surviving communists fled to Kurdistan, profoundly weakening the ICP’s organisational capacities in Arab Iraq.[58] However, by later moving into the Soviet orbit, the Baʿth opened the way to rapprochement with the now much-weakened ICP. The two groups formed a ‘nationalist front’ in July 1973 that allowed the communists to partially rebuild their organisation outside Kurdistan.[59]

Franzén argues, contra other scholars such as Tareq Y. Ismael, that the ICP’s policy of alignment with the Baʿth was not governed by a merely strategic logic, but was, rather, driven and sustained by a powerful ideological commitment:

> …the [ICP’s] essentially positive analysis of the [Baʿthist] regime as anti-imperialist, coupled with the safeguarding of the party’s fundamental independence and the material developments in the country, were the decisive factors in the ICP decision to enter into

[58] Franzén, *Red Star,* 126.
[59] Franzén, *Red Star,* 185.

> an alliance with the Baʿth Party… While seemingly opportunistic, the ICP was in fact excessively ideological in its reading of the regime.[60]

However, this ideological rigidity was itself a function of the social conditions in which the ICP found itself in the 1970s. Thus, it reflected not only the inequality of power between itself and the Baʿth, but the rigid sectoral logics and dynamics of competition between secular and Islamist forces that foreclosed cross-ideological cooperation as a strategic possibility for both sides. It was this constraining of the horizon of possible action that explains not only the ICP's dogged insistence on maintaining the fiction of the 'nationalist front' long after the Baʿth resumed their persecution of the Iraqi left, but also the ICP's willingness to participate in Baʿthist crackdowns on Shiʿi religious practices and the Islamist opposition in the 1970s. The ICP's stretching of communistic concepts and vocabularies to justify the Nationalist Front was not the cause of its strategic politics, but the end-product of deeper social forces.

The rout of the communists in the 1960s, and their subsequent policy of alignment with the Baʿth, left a vacuum for social and political organisation of Iraqi Shiʿa oppositionist currents. The Islamists, in the form of Hizb al-Daʿwa, seized this opportunity to capture the allegiance of social groups that the *hawza* had previously lost to communism. Thus, the Islamists' gaining strength during this period came on the same social terrain of the economically marginalised Shiʿi populations in Madinat al-Thawra in Baghdad and cities like Amarah, Nasiriyah and Basra that had formerly belonged to the ICP.[61] From the 1970s, Baʿthist repression increasingly targeted this rising Shiʿi Islamist opposition while also seeking to repress popular forms of Shiʿi religious practices. Most prominently, the Baʿth sought to restrict the annual commemoration of Imam Husayn, the Marad al-Ras procession from Najaf to Karbala'. In February 1977, the regime sought to ban the procession outright, sparking riots in Najaf involving some 30,000 demonstrators.[62] What became known to Iraqi Shiʿa as the Safar Intifada was put down with military force, resulting in the deaths of Shiʿi pilgrims and some 2,000 arrests.[63]

Baʿthist fear of the Shiʿi Islamist opposition gained in intensity following the 1979 revolution in Iran. It was following those tumultuous events that the Baʿth made membership of al-Daʿwa punishable by death. Thousands of al-Daʿwa activists were

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[60] Franzén, *Red Star,* 207.
[61] Batatu, 'Shiʿi Organizations in Iraq,' 183.
[62] Franzén, *Red Star*, 237-238.
[63] Franzén, *Red Star*, 237-238

arrested, some 200-250 were executed.[64] Soon after, on 5 April, Sadr was arrested and later executed alongside his sister, Bint al-Huda.[65] Shortly after Sadr's execution, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim fled to Iran where he would later found the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) under Iranian protection. Al-Daʿwa too would become a movement in exile.[66]

The ICP, for its part, stood shoulder to shoulder with the Baʿth in its efforts to control or repress Shiʿi religious institutions, popular religious practices and Islamist political activism. The ICP maintained its stance that religious politics was 'reactionary,' and that the Shiʿi ʿulamaʾ represented social classes that stood in the way of the 'progressive' political change being achieved via the ICP-Baʿthist Nationalist Front. The ICP even mirrored the Baʿth's equation of Shiʿi religious identity with fragmentary 'sectarianism'. [67] This cast a long shadow over leftist-Islamist dynamics in Iraqi politics, mirroring the effects of the anti-communist fatwas of the Najafi *marja'iyya* in 1959. Nevertheless, the Baʿth did not hesitate to turn the instruments of repression on the ICP in short order. The final termination of the nationalist front followed swiftly from Saddam Hussein's consolidation of power in 1979. In the face of the final Baʿthist onslaught, some 3,000 of the ICP's remaining activist cadres fled abroad.[68]

For the Islamists too, dynamics of sector-based competition with the ICP closed off possibilities for cooperation with those political forces who might otherwise have cooperated in resisting Baʿthist domination. As with Franzén and the ICP, Hanna Batatu attributed this aversion to coalition politics to an ideological factor. Writing in the 1980s, he noted that the defeat of the Islamist opposition in Iraq resulted from their '…inability to span a bridge even for temporary purposes with the other elements of the Iraqi opposition…' because the 'chasm between their worldview' and that of other opposition forces, including the ICP, was simply 'too wide to permit authentic or enduring cooperation among them.'[69] However, as with the ICP, this 'chasm' was not a feature of the ideological makeup of Iraq's Islamist movement, but a function of sectoral competition which structured how these ideological differences were perceived and parsed by movement actors.

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[64] Jabar, *The Shi'te Movement*, 232.
[65] Franzén, *Red Star*, 238.
[66] Jabar, *The Shi'te Movement*, 234.
[67] Franzén, *Red Star*, 238.
[68] Batatu, 'Shiʿi Organizations in Iraq,' 198.
[69] Batatu, 'Shiʿi Organizations in Iraq,' 183.

### *The Integrative and Disintegrative State and the Intellectual Field*

The consolidation of Baʿthist hegemony, which gathered pace in the 1970s, was fuelled in part by the massive expansion in state oil revenues which rose from $1 billion to $33 billion dollars between 1972 and 1980.[70] This allowed the Baʿth to aggressively expand their previously weak social bases of support, not only through material patronage and coercion (military spending, expanded security agencies, welfare and social services), but also through an ambitious project of cultural production.[71] The Baʿth were the first political force in Iraq to attempt to realise such an ambitious cultural project, distinguished by the party's integrative function vis-à-vis domains of symbolic production.[72]

As Joseph Sassoon describes, a network of party apparatchiks constituted a parallel structure within universities, overseeing and intervening in all manner of academic decisions.[73] The number of academic and scholarly journals, all under the control of the Ministry of Culture and Information, proliferated. Universities published more specialised journals, albeit subject to official censorship.[74] The Student Union was yet another party organ that monitored and controlled student activity at home and abroad.[75] The party was also involved in convening international literary and academic conferences and festivals.[76] By the 1980s, Baʿth Party membership was a prerequisite for joining a teachers' college. School curricula and textbooks were rewritten to serve the party's political objectives.[77]

In this way, teachers, students, journalists, artists and academics, from whom the ICP had drawn the mainstay of its leadership and activist cadres, were integrated into the party-state. The ICP's leadership and many of its activists had been executed, arrested or driven into exile by the 1980s. But the Baʿth also succeeded in transforming the social terrain that had produced the secular intelligentsia and shaped its particular cultural and ideological orientations. Thus, while the intelligentsia grew in terms of its institutional capacities from 1968, these were increasingly mobilised around the goals of the Baʿthist regime and enhancing its cultural hegemony. Davis notes, in this regard, that 'in studying the lineages of the Baʿthist state's efforts to control cultural production, it should be remembered that

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[70] Davis, *Memories of State,* 156.
[71] This has been most extensively explored by Eric Davis in *Memories of State*.
[72] Ofra Bengio, Saddam's World: Political discourse in Iraq (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 50.
[73] Joseph Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein's Ba'th party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 272.
[74] Davis, *Memories of State,* 162.
[75] Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein's*, 272.
[76] Davis, *Memories of State* 167.
[77] Bengio, *Saddam's World*, 50/51.

many leftist and communist intellectuals, some of whom worked under Qasim, later cooperated with if not actively assisted the Baʿth.'[78]

The disintegrative phase of the Baʿthist state, precipitated by the wars with Iran, Kuwait, the US, the 1991 Intifada and subsequent United Nations sanctions, was particularly destructive for the Iraqi intelligentsia. Some estimates put the decline in state spending on education after 1991 at 90 percent. Teachers were reduced to below-subsidence salaries. School drop-out rates increased as children were forced into work to financially support their families.[79] In 2002, school enrolment stood at only 53 percent. Literacy levels, which had been somewhat above the regional average, dropped to 34 percent in 1997 and declined further to 29 percent by 2001. State investment in universities also fell drastically.[80]

But it was not just a depletion of material resources that undermined Iraq's intelligentsia in the 1990s. In responding to the multiple crises that threatened the regime, there was an effort to diversify the state's sources of symbolic legitimacy. This entailed a reorientation of the regime's practice of power on two fronts: first, toward a remobilisation of tribal social formations and their attendant values and norms (the so-called 'neo-tribal' policy);[81] and second, to infuse everyday social life and the regime's cultural and political practices with Islamic religiosity and piety (the so-called 'Faith Campaign').[82] By seeking out these new sources of legitimacy, the regime created, or expanded and elevated a diverse range of social groups (including tribal Shaykhs and religious clerics) with distinct forms of social and symbolic capital.

This diversification came at the expense of the secular intelligentsia, who found their forms of symbolic legitimation devalued by the party-state to which they had been subordinated. For example, in 2003, Bayt al-Hikma (House of Wisdom), an elite Iraqi academic research institute closely associated with the Baʿth regime, was engaged in projects focused on the restoration of Babylonian civilisation and on Iraq's Mesopotamian and pre-Islamic past. These themes resonated with the early cultural endeavours of the

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[78] Davis, *Memories of State*, 203.
[79] Rakesh Kumar Ranjan and Prakash C. Jain, 'The Decline of Educational System in Iraq,' *Journal of Peace Studies* 16, no. 1-2 (January-June, 2009).
[80] David Watenpaugh et al., 'Opening the Doors: Intellectual Life and Academic Conditions in Post-War Baghdad.' *Iraqi Observatory*, July 15, 2003, 6. On the collapse of the Iraqi middle class during this period, see Allawi, *The Occupation,* 127-128.
[81] Amatzia Baram, 'Neo-Tribalism in Iraq: Saddam Hussein's Tribal Policies 1991-96,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29, no. 1 (February 1997): 1-31.
[82] Amatzia Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam, 1968-2003* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014).

regime.[83] However, by the 1990s, these were no longer central themes in its symbolic strategy, a strategy into which the secular intelligentsia had become increasingly peripheral as tribal and religious symbologies and practices took centre stage.

These transformations in the social terrain of Arab Iraq were not fully comprehended by the country's secular cultural elites, particularly those in exile. They would, however, shape the country's post-2003 politics in profound ways. The politics that came to the fore after the US invasion was not shaped by the secular intelligentsia, but by religious and Islamist forces, particularly those who had maintained a degree of autonomy from the defunct Baʿthist state. Consequently, it was the Shiʿi religious field, and its particular dynamics of intra-religious struggle, that would function as the terrain of emergence and then provide the social bases for new forms of political consciousness and activism.

### *The Integrative and Disintegrative State and Iraq's Religious Fields*

The Baʿth regime sought to apply the same integrative logic it deployed against the Iraqi intelligentsia to the religious sphere. Here, however, the distinct structures of the Sunni versus Shiʿi religious fields had a crucial impact on how they interacted with the regime. The Iraqi state had long taken a more direct hand in the management of Sunni religious affairs, which consequently proved more susceptible to integration. By contrast, the Shiʿi religious field would emerge as the sole remaining site from which a significant rival leadership to the Baʿth could emerge. It was this structural factor, over and above the Baʿth's sectarianism and ideological secularism, that drove antagonism between the regime and the Shiʿi clerics.

State management of Sunni religious affairs dated back to the Ottoman period when the Sunni religious establishment in Iraq had enjoyed a degree of state support. This became more formalised under the monarchy and during the period of the Qasim regime with tighter regulation of Sunni *waqf* charitable trusts and mosque construction during the monarchical period and the formal recognition of Sunni mosque preachers and other religious functionaries as civil servants in the 1950s.[84] The Baʿth expanded the state's influence over the Sunni religious arena, starting with elimination of the institution of Iraq's grand mufti,

[83] Davis, *Memories of State*, 148.
[84] Nathaniel Rabkin, 'The Sunni Religious Leadership in Iraq,' *Hudson Institute,* June 2, 2018. https://www.hudson.org/research/14304-the-sunni-religious-leadership-in-iraq

removing the potential for a central Sunni religious authority empowered to issue fatwas.[85] Meanwhile, the 1976 Ordinance on Service in Religious and Charitable Institutions reforms ordered Sunni imams to include Baʿthist propaganda in their sermons and centralised Sunni religious schools under state control.[86] The regime involved itself in appointments by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs and sought to impose party loyalists in every position.[87] Friday sermons, imams and mosque attendees were systematically monitored.[88]

The regime's pivot toward Islam, most marked during the Faith Campaign, further entrenched a patron-client relationship between the state and Sunni clerics by providing the latter greater material resources which cemented their dependence on the regime in exchange for social prestige and material benefits. Like the secular intelligentsia, many of the Sunni clergy put their symbolic capital at the behest of the party-state, and thus internalised the idiosyncratic religious vision that emerged from Saddam Hussein's merger of Baʿthism with Islam. Those clergy and Islamist activists who attempted to operate more independently from the Baʿth regime were still subject to intense forms of surveillance and control.[89]

The Shiʿi religious field was an altogether different proposition from the perspective of state-society relations. The Shiʿi ʿulamaʾ retained their autonomy from the state as an informally institutionalised clerical hierarchy and source of religious preaching and law via the *marja'iyya, ḥawzāt*, and *ḥusayniyyāt*, and as an educational institution via the Shiʿi madrasas. The Shiʿi religious field also retained more financial autonomy from the state. Its dependency ran, rather, through the Shiʿi lay community who voluntarily provided the *khums* and through the Shiʿi pilgrims and the offerings they made during religious ceremonies and rites.

Thus, the same structural features that explained the vulnerability of the Iraqi *hawza* to the rise of secular politics in the early 20th century – dependence on informal and 'traditional' modes of social relations and practice, and autonomy from the political and economic power of the rising modern state – were the same features that enabled the field to resist the integrative logic of Baʿthist power. The *hawza* was not dependent on forms of social relations, institutions and symbolic capitals associated with the new spheres of action

[85] Amatzia Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam, 1968-2003* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014), 92.
[86] Rabkin, 'The Sunni Religious Leadership.'
[87] Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein's*, 272, 261
[88] Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein's*, 272, .261
[89] Baram, *Saddam Husayn,* 267-270.

associated with the emergence of the modern state, since, as Amatzia Baram has argued, it 'did not need to invent a new organisation complete with ideology, media, hierarchy, ceremonies, and meeting centers: they had the mosque, the *ḥusayniyya*, the madrasa, and even their private homes, all traditional institutions, highly respected by their public.'[90] The power of the *hawza* was thus more diffuse and embedded in informal social ties and everyday practices. This type of power was more difficult for the Baʿthist regime to integrate, co-opt or destroy compared, for example, with the ease of closing down the media outlets and ideological production of al-Daʿwa or the ICP, or liquidating their political organisations.

This autonomy, and the interdependency between the Shiʿi mujtahids and their social bases, made the Shiʿi religious authorities a dangerous competing elite in the eyes of the Baʿth.[91] Since the regime could not co-opt or integrate the Shiʿi religious networks into the party-state, it relied heavily on its security apparatus as its primary tool of coercion.[92] The aim was the place the *hawza* 'under siege,' to isolate it socially and keep its social stakes contained within the narrow confines of the field. This 'quarantining' of the Shiʿi religious field sought to constrain its practices to an esoteric mode of religious scholarship without broader political implications. However, it also left the field as the only fairly autonomous social site with mobilising potential and symbolic resources. The funnelling of social and political activism into this field, and their refraction through its structures and forms of intra-religious struggle, shaped the forms of opposition politics that emerged inside Iraq during the 1990s. This manifest in the Sadr II phenomenon and explains how and why this religious movement departed in important ways from both previous iterations of Shiʿi Islamist movements in Iraq and broader transformations occurring within the exiled opposition.

### *Transformations in Exile: The Iraqi Opposition*

Beginning in the 1990s, scholars began to notice and take a renewed interest in leftist-Islamist cooperation in opposition politics in the Arab world that seemed to signal an

[90] Baram, *Saddam Husayn*, 92.
[91] Baram, *Saddam Husayn*, 90.
[92] Baram, *Saddam Husayn*, 91; Abbas Kadhim, 'The Hawza Under Siege: A Study in the Ba'th Party Archives,' *IISBU Occasional Paper* 1 (June 2013).

ideological realignment was taking place.[93] These dynamics were influenced by broad historical forces, principally the collapse of the Soviet Union, but also by more local conditions which called for strategic cooperation in opposition politics to autocratic regimes across the Arab world. The dynamics of Iraqi exile opposition politics, particularly during the 1990s, also reflected these patterns of ideological adaptation and convergence between leftist and Islamist forces. However, in this case, the more direct involvement of the US and UK in shaping Iraqi exile politics added distinct pressures and incentives.

The ICP undertook significant ideological revisions, prompted in part by the political and ideological retraction of the Soviet Union. The most radical ideological changes in the ICP's official doctrines came with the Fifth Party Congress – called 'the Congress of Democratisation and Renewal' – held in Shaqlawa in Kurdistan in 1993. As Ismael has argued, the Fifth Congress 'transformed the party from a Marxist-Leninist party into a mild, social democratic one.'[94] This ideological opening-up also included a greater receptivity to Islamic currents, one senior ICP official explained this in the following terms: 'We also talked about what is progressive in the Islamic and Arab heritage, so we opened up what is progressive to include a wider range of influences.'[95] In reorienting the Party ideologically on questions of Islam, the ICP was part of a broader trend in leftist politics on the international scene. In both Europe and the Arab world, leftist political movements ceased to see Islamists as automatically reactionary or fascist, recasting them as potential allies in strategic class struggle.[96] However, these ideological changes also had a pragmatic aspect, helping integrate the ICP into Iraqi opposition politics, within which Shiʿi Islamist groups were playing an increasingly prominent role.[97]

The deep involvement of the US and UK in Iraqi exile politics provided further incentives and pressures for ideological adaptation. In fact, the Iraqi Shiʿi Islamist groups in exile transformed their ideological outlook during the 1990s, partly in order to better accommodate to Western, and particularly US, interests and perspectives. Thus, according to 'Ali 'Allawi, al-Daʿwa, which was designated a terrorist group by the State Department in

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[93] Maha Abdelrahman, '"With the Islamists? - Sometimes. With the State? - Never!" Cooperation between the Left and Islamists in Egypt,' *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 1 (April 2009): 37.
[94] Ismael, *The Rise,* 286-288.
[95] Salam Ali, interview by author, London, July 20, 2017.
[96] For example, see Chris Harman, *The Prophet and the Proletariat: Islamic Fundamentalism. Class and Revolution* (London: International Socialism, 1999), 53.
[97] Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 50-53. Both SCIRI and al-Daʿwa participated in the 1992 Salahuddin conference, see Joel Wing, 'Origins of Iraq's Ethnosectarian Quota System,' *Musings on Iraq* (August 13, 2014).

1985, gradually shifted from a revolutionary to a 'more acceptable social democratic party, with Islamic roots' during the same period of the ICP's ideological transformation. SCIRI, too, 'began to accept the pragmatist imperative in its dealings with the west.'[98]

## IV
## The Sadr II Movement: Prophets, Priests and Messianism

The internal Iraqi opposition, which manifest in the Sadr II movement of the 1990s, was fairly isolated from these developments and largely off the radar of the exiled groups plotting Iraq's future from Tehran, Damascus and London. The Sadr II movement was thus shaped by an entirely different set of social conditions and strategic interests which produced a movement distinct in its structures of thought and action from its Islamist contemporaries and also from previous iterations of Shiʿi Islamist movements in Iraq. The sorts of ideological transformations and tentative forms of political cooperation that had characterised the ICP's relationship with other Islamist elements of the Iraqi exile opposition did not transpose onto the Sadr movement, prefiguring a distinct relationship between the two movements in post-2003 Iraq. This section discusses the emergence of the Sadr II phenomenon in the 1990s and outlines the features of the social base and organisation that would shape the Sadr movement's post-2003 politics in crucial ways.

The notion that a conspiracy by the regime lay behind the rise in the late 1990s of Ayatollah Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr (aka. Sadr II, cousin of Baqir al-Sadr, Sadr I) to contest the leadership of Iraqi *hawza* remains a point of historical controversy. Iraq historian Phebe Marr, for example, writes that Sadeq al-Sadr 'had been handpicked by the regime to a *marja'* amenable to its interests.[99] This view is echoed in Patrick Cockburn's account of the Sadrist movement. [100] Others talk of 'rumours' that the Baʿth had 'signed a formal agreement' with Sadeq al-Sadr giving him control of the *hawza*.[101] Baram goes even further, arguing that the conflict over leadership of the *hawza* was primarily the result of

[98] Allawi, *The Occupation,* 74.
[99] Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of* Iraq (Philadelphia: Westview Press, 2012), 249.
[100] 'The man Saddam chose to be religious leader of the Shia community was Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr,' Patrick Cockburn¸ *Muqtada*: *Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revival and the Struggle for Iraq* (London: Scribner, 2008), 79
[101] 'Iraq's Muqtada Al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?' *International Crisis Group,* July 11, 2006, 3

Sadr's 'close collaboration with the Baʿth regime during most of the 1990s'.[102] However, little evidence has ever been brought forward to prove these claims. By contrast, Abbas Kadhim argues that the regime maintained a consistent hostility to Sadeq al-Sadr and his movement throughout the 1990s.[103]

Enduring disagreements on this question likely reflect an ambiguity in Baʿthist policy with respect to the *hawza* in general and Sadeq al-Sadr in particular. The regime pursued multiple and often contradictory courses of action, unable to find a final solution to the problem posed by the *hawza* and the rise of the Sadr II movement within it. Thus, the Baʿth certainly saw strategic potential in the emergence of an Arab-Iraqi *marja'* in Najaf to contest Persian leadership of the *hawza*. This would explain why the regime facilitated Sadeq al-Sadr's takeover of the *hawza's* madrasas and allowed him to inaugurate an Islamic court in Najaf, re-open libraries destroyed by the regime's 1991 crackdown and launch his own publication al-Huda.[104] At the same time, the Sadr II movement's particular mode of religious mobilisation was altogether more threatening to the regime than the so-called 'quietism,' of the traditional *hawza*. Constraining the role of the Shiʿi mujtahids to a narrow religious function was intended to prevent them assuming a broader, rival communal leadership. Yet, Sadeq al-Sadr's claim to religious authority was oriented against precisely this narrow interpretation, and thus his bid for religious leadership threatened to erode the carefully maintained sectoral boundaries of the Shiʿi religious field and spill over into areas that threatened Baʿthist hegemony.

The Sadr II movement, then, was a phenomenon in which the Baʿthist regime intervened from the outside, but did not create or shape in a systematic and strategically coherent way, nor impart the movement's fundamental features. Rather, this was a movement structured by intra-religious dynamics of social struggle over religious authority, a struggle anchored within the Shiʿi religious field. The most important way in which the Baʿth regime interacted with this struggle was via its closing down alternative avenues for social, cultural and political activism, thereby channelling these social dynamics into the Shiʿi religious field

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[102] Amatzia Baram, 'Sadr the Father, Sadr the Son, the "Revolution in Shiʿism," and the Struggle for Power in the Hawzah of Najaf' in *Iraq Between Occupations, eds.* R. Zeidel, A. Baram, and Achim Rohde eds. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 144.
[103] Kadhim, 'The Hawza Under Siege,' Kadhim's case rests on analysis of Ba'th Party archives recovered post-2003. However, he relies heavily on assessments being sent back to the Ba'th leadership by the local Ba'th party officials in Najaf. These documents better reflect the perspectives of the local party and security officials in Najaf and Kufa, and their best guesses as to the regime's position vis-à-vis Sadeq al-Sadr, and not necessarily a reliable account of the regime's actual policy.
[104] ICG, 'Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr,' 3.

which then shaped them in particular ways. This made the Sadr II movement distinct from that of Baqir al-Sadr and al-Daʿwa who were engaged in inter-field strategies that sought to stake out positions of influence in social sectors beyond the religious field. In this way, a younger generation of clerics and religiously-minded lay activists had been able to compete for power and prestige outside the strictures and sclerotic hierarchies of the traditional Najafi *hawza*.

By contrast, since the Sadr II movement was built out of the Shiʿi religious field it emerged as a cleric-led and cleric-hegemonized movement whose modes of authority and legitimation were entirely religious-metaphysical. The movement emanated from more junior and subordinate positions within the clerical hierarchy and can, therefore, be interpreted in terms of Weber's distinction between the divergent ethics and strategies of extant clerical hierarchies and religious insurgents ('priests' versus 'prophets').[105] The model of the priest represents the summation of routinised religious authority which is highly institutionalised and systematised. Consequently, it is also rule following, rational-legalistic authority resides in the institution, rather than the person, and is transferred via systematic and institutionalised processes. The orientation of the priest is towards the reproduction of the status quo, of extant religious institutions, hierarchies and practices from which the priest derives status, purpose and resources.

In a more Bourdieusian view, the priest's social practices entail the reproduction of the religious field as fairly autonomous social domain with a distinct corporate identity. The outcome of this processes is the 'priestly class,' marked by a high degree of 'otherness,' or separation, from the rest of the social world. This otherness relates to the priestly vocation's claim to be sole arbiter between the metaphysical-eschatological and the mundane-everyday worlds. The clerical vocation – management of the goods of salvation – entails a claim to monopoly on the production of sacred capital as the interpreter of revelation embodied in the sacred texts, the promulgation of the divine law, and the administration and performance of religious rites and ceremonies.[106] In enacting this practice, the priestly class renders profane what is exterior to the religious field, thus priestly practice entails secularisation by carving the world up into the sacred and the profane. Consequently, the priest also tends to be oriented against popular forms of religiosity that immanentise the

[105] Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion,* trans. Ephraim Fischoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 20-31 (on the priest), 46-59 (on the prophet).
[106] This takes inspiration from Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 164-165.

sacred in the everyday world, and against unmediated religious experience (mysticism), construing these as ‘irrational’ ‘superstitions’ and ‘deviations’ from ‘true faith’.

The prophet, by contrast, is an originator and not a sustainer, and is thus oriented against routinisation, systematisation and institutionalisation. Moreover, in contesting the leadership of the priest, the prophet must overturn the norms, institutions and practices on which the latter’s authority is predicated. Thus, the prophet claims a charismatic authority that inheres in the person rather than the institution, repudiates rational-legalism and rule-following in favour of rule breaking and rejects established norms and practices pertaining to the organisation of religious hierarchies and the transfer of religious authority. The prophet situates himself ‘with the people,’ and contrasts this with the priest’s social separation. In doing so, the prophet seeks to immanentise religious authority in the everyday i.e., to collapse the metaphysical and eschatological into the mundane and the profane. Consequently, the prophet embraces a popular religiosity and mystical experience, reconfiguring these as alternative sources of religious authority.

As an insurgent force, the prophet lacks the organisational capacities and resources of the institutionalised religious establishment. Consequently, he is incentivised to draw in resources from social sites outside the religious field. This produces a blurring of field boundaries as arenas of previously profane and secular activity become infused with religious significance. This also manifests in a paradoxical quality to the religious nature of prophetic authority, it being both more personal and more diffuse and distributed amongst the community of followers. This relationship functions in the way the prophet draws his followers into proximity with his personhood, allowing them to participate directly in the sacred via this (sometimes physical) proximity.

Thus, the prophet embodies the messianic form of religious mobilisation, breaking down the boundaries between the metaphysical, eschatological, sacred, and the mundane and profane worlds. The role of priest as gate keeper and conduit between the two worlds is obviated by the immanent presence in *this world* of the divine. Messianism, in this view, is associated with desectorisation of social reality as a socio-structural condition which allows religious-metaphysical social stakes to escape the religious field and be transformed into a meta-structuring principle of power for all of social and political life. Where desectorisation of the social landscape is not present, the prophetic mode remains contained to the religious field in a persistent subordination to clerical authority. In this case, its function becomes, as Weber envisaged, the rejuvenation of clerical authority, i.e. it does not emerge

as a mode of religious leadership in its own right, but is gradually routinised and integrated into the priestly class.

Thus, not all movements for religious renewal come in the mode of the prophet or assume messianic features. In fact, many, while challenging the priestly class, are themselves priestly in their ultimate teleology, i.e. they seek to make the clerical establishment *more* priestly, rather than subverting its priestly features. Baqir al-Sadr's project for renewal of the Iraqi *hawza,* for example, sought to make the *hawza* more priestly, to modernise its institutions and practices, to make it more rational and rule governed, to inscribe religious authority more deeply in the institution of the *marja'iyya* and less in the personhood of the *marja'*, to make the transfer of authority between *marāji*ʿ more institutionalised, rule bound, and systematic and less informal and ad hoc. His intellectual project also sought to systematise and ideologise religious authority and maintain a separation between the two.

Consequently, from this perspective, Sadr I and Sadr II are divergent religious phenomena. They were shaped by different structural conditions and embodied distinct modes of religious mobilisation. The view that the two phenomena constitute a single development, or as Baram argues, that the Sadr II phenomenon 'is an extension of the dispute between the Najaf establishment and [Sadeq al-]Sadr's paternal first cousin, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, during the early 1960s,'[107] tends to obscure these crucial differences between the two – priestly versus prophetic – and the contextual factors form which these differences emerged.

Elements of the prophetic mode are visible in many aspects of the Sadr II phenomenon. Sadeq al-Sadr occupied a subordinate position within the religious field and was never recognised as a credible ayatollah, let alone Grand Ayatollah or *marja'*, according to the norms of the Shiʿi religious field. He was born in 1943 and was a pupil of his more esteemed cousin Baqir al-Sadr until the latter's assassination in 1980. At this time, Sadeq al-Sadr was placed under house arrest by the regime and was thus isolated from the *hawza*. By 1992, when Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei died and leadership of the *hawza* passed to Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani, Sadeq al-Sadr was relatively unknown in the Shiʿi religious field. He had not made a notable contribution to either religious or intellectual

[107] Baram 'Sadr the Father,' 143. Pierre-Jean Luizard, by contrast, also sees an important distinction between Baqir and Sadeq al-Sadr, see Pierre-Jean Luizard, 'The Sadrists in Iraq: Challenging the United States, the *Marja'iyya* and Iran,' in *The Shiʿa Worlds and Iran*, ed. Sabrina Mervin (London: Saqi, 2007) 256.

domains. He was also an outsider from the perspective of the clerical hierarchy in Iran, both for his lack of jurisprudential accreditations and his perceived closeness to the Baʿth regime. In fact, in 1998 when Sadeq al-Sadr sent representatives to Qom with a view to building networks and establishing offices there, they were widely rejected by the Iranian clerical elite.[108]

Sadr's bid for power, therefore, drew instead on personal-charismatic leadership, popular forms of religiosity and mysticism. He sought to reconnect the *hawza* with its 'popular bases,' (*al-qawā'd al-sha'biyya*), making religious authority more direct and less formal. This entailed engagement with the tribal populations in the Shiʿi south where Sadeq al-Sadr built on the extant religious customs and practices and the tribes (which the established ayatollahs denounced as deviations or superstitions). Sadeq al-Sadr permitted tribal elders to issue religious rulings and administer Islamic law, thereby diluting the prerogatives of the clerical class and instantiating forms of religious authority in social sites beyond the *hawza*.[109] Reconnecting the *hawza* to its popular bases also entailed rejuvenating the commemorations of ʿAshuraʾ and the Araba'in pilgrimage to Karbala.[110] The new wave of Shiʿi social activism was construed as preparing the ground for the Imam's return and his redemptive role in the struggle against tyranny and injustice, which was linked by Sadeq al-Sadr to the present this-worldly conditions and suffering of the Iraqi Shiʿa.

Sadeq al-Sadr combined this positive claim to religious leadership with an attack on the esoteric textualism and social separation of the traditional *hawza*. Expertise in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), according to Sadeq al-Sadr, was not a qualification for a more expansive notion of religious leadership, but only for a more constrained vocation of teaching and high-minded intellectual endeavour. Since this vocation, embodied by the so-called quietist *marājī* of Najaf, had abdicated a more active role in protecting and advancing the interests of the Shiʿi masses in social and political affairs, its economic resources and other institutional capacities ought to pass to a *marja'* willing to assume this leadership. Thus, Sadr sought to detach the mujtahids in Najaf from their economic resources and usurp their control over the madrasas and religious charities.[111]

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[108] This included Grand Ayatollah Kazem Husseini al-Ha'iri, who expelled Sadr's messenger, Abu Saif al-Waili, from his house and accused him of working for Ba'thist intelligence agencies, (ironic given that al-Ha'iri would later become – for a time – a *marja'* of the Sadr movement). See Rashid al-Khayoun, *al-Islam al-Siyyasi fi-l-'Iraq* (UAE: al-Mesbar, 2012), 383.
[109] Marisa Cochrane, 'The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement,' *Institute for the Study of War,* 2009, 8.
[110] ICG, 'Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr,' 3-4.
[111] ICG, 'Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr,' 3-6.

These elements of the Sadr II phenomenon were articulated in two new innovations around Sadr's mode of religious leadership: first, the distinction Sadeq al-Sadr drew between what he termed '*al-ḥawza al-nāṭiqa al-mujaḥida' (*the speaking jihad *hawza)* and '*al-ḥawza al-sākita/al-ṣāmita'* (the silent/passive *hawza*)*;* and second, his coining of the term *marja'iyyat al-maydān* (the field-based or practice-based *marja'*). Both remain popularly associated with the Sadr movement to this day. In the first formulation, *al-ḥawza al-sākita/al-ṣāmita* describes how the traditional hawza had assumed a silent or passive posture in the face of tyranny and injustice. By contrast, *al-ḥawza al-nāṭiqa* described an alternative and superior mode of religious authority that drew its legitimacy from its willingness to speak out and take an active role in defending the faithful against injustice. *Marja'iyyat al-maydān*, meanwhile, described Sadeq al-Sadr's appeal to a more charismatic authority rooted in popular religiosity and proximity to the people. However, a deeper interpretation of *marja'iyyat al-maydān* sees an epistemological distinction being drawn between the 'abstract' textualism of the traditional mujtahids and 'concrete' knowledge located in the action of the 'practice-based *marja'iyya'* of Sadeq al-Sadr.[112]

Sadeq al-Sadr's mode of religious leadership encompassed a political as well as social dimension. Reinstituting Friday payers was an inherently political act. The Friday *khuṭba* is by its nature a political event, interpreting and commenting on current affairs. In the Shiʿi tradition, the refusal to lead or participate in Friday prayers established the divide between the temporal and metaphysical authority, clarifying the illegitimacy of temporal authority in the absence of the Mahdi. Thus, by leading Friday prayers, Sadeq al-Sadr was both staking a claim to political leadership and breaking the divide between the profane and sacred domains. He invoked the concept of *vilāyat-i faqīh* and proclaimed himself *wālī amr al-muslimin/al-wilaya al-'amma*, fusing religious and political leadership and claiming authority over all Iraqi Shiʿa.[113]

Thus, this prophetic claim to religious leadership emerged from the dialectical struggle over religious authority that belonged to the Shiʿi religious field. However, its implications as a practice sought to collapse the metaphysical into the profane and mundane world and immanentize religious authority across broader domains of social reality. It is not surprising,

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[112] This interpretation is based on author's reading of 'Adil Ru'uf, *Marja'iyyat al-Maydan: Mohammad Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr, his Project of Change and the Facts of his Assassination* (Damascus: The Iraqi Centre for Science and Studies, 2006). This text remains widely circulated and popular with Iraqi Shiʿa and Sadrists.
[113] Baram 'Sadr the Father, 149.

then, that the Sadr II movement, once it gathered momentum, was so feared and violently resisted by the Baʿth regime which depended heavily on sectoral politics to sustain its political hegemony. It would be a mistake, however, to regard this confrontation as the key dynamic shaping the Sadr II movement and its mode of religious mobilisation. Rather, this conflict was a secondary effect of an intra-religious struggle whose dialectical logic inevitably threatened Baʿthist hegemony. In the end, the Baʿthist regime resorted to extreme violence, assassinating Sadeq al-Sadr, along with two of his four sons, as they returned from mosque in Najaf in February 1999.[114]

Given the prophetic nature of the Sadr II religious movement, it would be misleading to overstate its proximities to Marxist-leftist movements. It is true that, in a broad sense, many Sadrist clerics, particularly from the older generation, were familiar with the revolutionary-Marxist intellectual currents that had shaped Islamist movements in Iran and Iraq in earlier decades. This manifest, for example, in a degree of resonance between the two movements in terms of their symbols and narratives around social justice and anti-imperialism (although, the degree to which social justice idioms are endogenous to Islam and not derivative of leftist ideology is often under recognised). However, the Sadr II movement was both less political and less ideological that earlier iterations of Islamism in Iraq. It was also more anchored in the religious field. This created a chasm between the Sadr II movement and the Iraqi left that was not so much a divergence in ideologies, but a more fundamental separation in their forms of practice and the social stakes around which these practices were oriented.

In the end, it was in its prophetic messianism, not in any sense of concrete political ideology, that the Sadr II phenomenon most closely approached a quasi-Marxist praxis. Marx had sought to bring ‘heaven’ down to ‘earth,’ to overcome the divided existence of humanity – the alienated terrain of civil society from the state – and make politics immanent in social life. Sadeq al-Sadr sought to bring metaphysical authority down to earth and make it imminent in social and political life, to overcome the alienated terrain of the Shiʿi masses that was divided from both a distant and abstracted religious authority ensconced in the Najafi *hawza* and a remote political authority that excluded and marginalised Shiʿi identity. It is no coincidence, then, that Sadeq al-Sadr’s view on Marxism, expressed only briefly during the famous *Hannana* interview recording, compared Marxism’s ‘utopian essence’

[114] It is often forgotten that Muqtada is one of two surviving sons. Murtada al-Sadr, Muqtada’s brother, is thought to have learning difficulties and to reside in Iran.

favourably with his vision of Shiʿi religious leadership. It is, in the end, in its utopianism that Marxism approximates most closely to religious messianism, i.e. both Marxism and messianism seek the erasure of differentiated social reality (which is construed as a form of alienation), both internally and from the metaphysical, and thus to clear the ground for a totalising immanence.[115]

This mode of religious mobilisation imparted a particular social base in terms of organisational structure, social ties and symbolic resources that would shape the strategies of the Sadr movement in the post-2003 period. As the movement was anchored in the religious field, this base was composed primarily of clerical networks emerging from junior-subordinate positions within the Najafi religious hierarchy. This network ran through the apparatus of the religious field, i.e. the mosques, *husainiyaat,* madrasas*,* religious courts and libraries and private homes of clerics and *hawza* students. Sadeq al-Sadr added a further layer of institutionalisation to this network, creating offices that functioned as the organisational hubs for coordinating the movement's religious, charitable activities and social activism. This institutional network, which spanned both poor urban districts and rural-tribal constituencies, in Baghdad and the Shiʿi south, would become the organisational nerve centre and key institutional resource of the Sadr movement post-2003 (the Office of the Martyr al-Sadr, OMS).

Crucially, this organisational structure facilitated strong vertical social linkages and relationships between the clerical stratum and broad social formations amongst the urban poor and rural Shiʿi populations in the south. These, however, were highly localised in particular contexts. Thus, for instance, religious taxes and duties collected through local religious officials and representatives (*wukala'*) of Sadeq al-Sadr would often be redistributed directly within the neighbourhoods and communities in which they were collected. This was particularly the case when the Baʿth regime began targeting the *wukala'* networks for repression and liquidation in an effort to undercut the movement's economic resources.[116]

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[115] This is based on author's translation of sections of the Hannana interview that are available on YouTube. Juan Cole makes a stronger claim regarding what he sees as strong Marxist influence on Sadeq al-Sadr. However, the evidence Cole provides for this relates to an anecdote retold by Dhia al-Asadi involving Sadeq al-Sadr being presented with a copy of *The Paris Commune*. This is not strong evidence, especially considering that Dhia al-Asadi is himself a Sadrist intellectual with strong leftist leanings. See Cole, 'The United States,': 551. Overemphasising these links to Marxist political thought tends to obscure the fundamentally religious nature of the Sadr II phenomenon.

[116] Dhia al-Asadi, discussions with the author via electronic communication, December 2018. Dhia al-Asadi, senior Sadrist intellectual and political figure who is conducting his own research into the movement's pre-

These linkages had two important effects. First, they uniquely positioned the Sadr movement post-2003 as a group with extant mobilising and organisational capacities. These could not be matched by returning exile groups (including the ICP) who lacked these vertical ties. Second, their localisation in particular contexts was a factor in the Sadr movement's weak horizontal linkages amongst its leadership strata. In other words, while the movement's clerical networks were socially embedded in their local domains, their interconnections to other parts of the movement outside these contexts was less developed. This weakness in horizontal ties becomes a key factor in explaining the Sadr movement's strategic practices post-2003, particularly when the movement began to develop additional leadership strata that were further distanced from each other by their localisation in distinct fields of action (e.g. paramilitary, intellectual and political).

Finally, the religious-messianic mode of the Sadr II movement produced a particular set of symbolic resources that also shaped the movement's strategies post-2003. Crucially, these were also anchored in the religious field and in the particular prophetic mode of metaphysical legitimation embodied both in Sadeq al-Sadr's leadership and in the ritual-bound practices of the movement's popular religiosity. This prefigured a mode of symbolic politics that made no claims on the intellectual or political fields and their distinct forms of authority and legitimation, and made no use their cultural technologies. In concrete terms, this meant the Sadr movement did not develop, articulate or engage in the sorts of systematic and highly abstract forms of ideological politics associated with the Iraqi intelligentsia and professional politics. Thus, while the Sadr movement's lack of these resources is popularly attributed to the movement's lack of sophistication (as if systematising ideological discourses were a universal correlate of political action), it is properly understood as a by-product of the social terrain on the which the movement emerged.

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2003 origins. There are also references in the Ba'th Party archives to the regime's monitoring of *wukala'* networks, see Kadhim, 'The Hawza Under Siege,': 34.

# V
# Conclusion

This chapter has been about the strategic politics of Iraq's leftist and Shiʿi Islamist social movements prior to the invasion in 2003. It has sought to show how the conjunction of broad historical forces – such as European imperialism, modernity and the rise of the nation state – with more local conditions contained in particular fields of practice, shaped the formation of political subjects and the strategic politics of leftist and Islamist movements in Iraq. The relationship between the Iraqi left and the Sadr movement in the post-invasion years cannot be understood without this historical perspective.

Most important, by exploring the pre-war social bases of the left and the Sadr movement this chapter has set the groundwork for explaining how the two movements would adopt particular strategies during the invasion and post-invasion phases of Iraqi politics, setting them on divergent trajectories and opposing sides of the evolving struggle for power in Iraq. The ICP, the Iraqi secular intelligentsia and the Sadr movement were not primed for cooperation owing to their shared social bases and cultural and political perspectives. Rather, they were separated by the distinct contexts of internal Iraqi opposition versus politics in exile, and by a deeper divergence in their modes of practice and contexts of social action. This divergence reflected a distinction between a movement anchored in the secular intelligentsia and one whose practices were shaped fundamentally by intra-religious struggles within the Shiʿi religious field.

# CHAPTER THREE
# IRAQ'S SADR MOVEMENT: FROM MESSIANIC MILITANCY TO 'CULTURAL RESISTANCE' (2003-2014)

## I
## Introduction

This chapter applies a social movement lens to the Sadr movement in order to explain its political behaviour between 2003 and 2014. Its focus is unpacking the movement's apparent shift from a form of messianic militancy to what Muqtada al-Sadr called 'cultural resistance'. This entailed a radical alteration in the movement's orientation towards Iraq's secular intelligentsia which, this thesis argues, was the first building block in the leftist-Sadrist alliance. However, this was neither a homogenous nor linear transformation in the Sadr movement's ideology or political orientation. Rather, it reflected a diversification of the movement's resources resulting from Sadrist engagement in different spheres of social action. This gave rise to greater ideological heterogeneity and intra-movement contestation of Sadrist politics.

This dynamic of transformation within the Sadrist movement is linked here to a pattern of structural differentiation of Iraqi social space produced by the U.S.-led invasion and subsequent reordering of Iraq's social and political systems. Of most consequence, was the violent dismemberment of parts of the Ba'thist state and the incremental consolidation of a new political field with its own formal and informal rules, norms and political categories. The interregnum between this new political field and the previous Ba'thist system contains many of the socio-structural factors that help explain the Sadr movement's early mode of messianic militancy. Similarly, as the new political field took shape, along with a clearer delineation of other spheres, such as the Shi'i religious field, the Sadr movement's politics evolved in ways that reflected these new structural boundaries.

This remaking of Iraq's socio-political order post-2003 had two crucial impacts that are worth highlighting at the outset. The first is how the invasion made violence – or coercive capital – the central currency of political power. The toppling of the previous regime and imposition of a new political order were achieved and sustained through military force.

Moreover, the U.S. did not deploy sufficient numbers of troops to maintain law and order or provide security in early post-invasion phase.[1] Consequently, possession of coercive capital was, from the beginning, an existential matter for political actors. Some of these groups, such as SCIRI or the Kurdish KDP and PUK, entered the field with a substantial coercive capacity of their own. Others, most notably the Sadr movement, very quickly mobilised coercive resources in order to stake a claim in the new political landscape.

The Sadr movement's use of violence was further incentivised by its exclusion from the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), partly at the behest of secular and liberal factions such as the ICP.[2] The IGC was a body appointed in July 2003 by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) under the direction of U.S. civilian administrator Paul Bremer. It was a twenty-five member council of Iraqis with limited authority over drafting laws, budgets and appointments to ministries, all of which was subject to a U.S. veto.[3] Its most central task was drawing up of the Law of Administration for the State of Iraq for the Transitional Period (TAL). This was essentially a temporary constitution determining the path toward the dissolution of the CPA and its handing sovereignty over to an Interim Iraqi Government to oversee elections for a constitutional assembly and national referendum.[4] Excluding the Sadr movement from the IGC thus meant that the Sadrists were accorded no formal role in early determinations that were setting the new rules for Iraq's post-2003 politics. Violence became the means by which the Sadr movement would assert its presence, and ensure its participation, in sites of social struggle wherein more dominant actors sought to exclude or subordinate the movement.

The second crucial impact that flowed from the remaking of Iraq's post-2003 political order relates not to coercive but symbolic power. This refers to the imposition on Iraqi politics and society of certain categories of symbolic practice. These categories determined how society was to be structured and the basis upon which membership would be organised and according to which political participation would occur (what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as the 'principles of di-vision… the instruments for perceiving and expressing the

[1] The lack of troops and the difficulties which the CPA faced in providing security in the early post-invasion weeks and months are discussed at length in the first chapter of Paul Bremer's autobiography. See, Paul Bremer, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope* (New York: Treshold Editions, 2006).
[2] Ali Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War Losing the Peace* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 167.
[3] Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007*).* 284.
[4] Tripp, *A History of Iraq,* 286.

social world').[5] In Iraq's case, these categories of symbolic practice were the sectarian and ethnic divisions which constituted the basis for the distribution of political power. These categories acted as a form of symbolic violence imposed on Iraqi society,[6] most notably via the organisation of the IGC along ethnic and sectarian lines.[7]

Whether the origins of this sectarian logic are pinned exclusively on the U.S.-led CPA,[8] or have deeper roots in the organisation of the pre-2003 Iraqi exile opposition,[9] the ultimate effect was the same. This entailed the re-articulation of those actors who participated in the post-2003 political order in sectarian terms (this included the ICP which took its seat on the IGC as a member of a supposed Shi'i sectarian grouping). By contrast, it was the informal politics unfolding outside the U.S.-sponsored process that adopted the antithetical categories of symbolic practice that rejected this sectarian division of Iraqi society. Most notably, this included the Sadr movement whose early mobilisation against the occupation was expressed in explicitly cross-sectarian terms.[10] The movement's later engagement in forms of sectarian politics and violence was not, in this view, an expression of an essentially sectarian nature, but reflected, at least in part, the enduring effects of the symbolic violence imposed by the negotiation of political power between the U.S. and the returning exile groups.

New primary sources are used here to uncover previously obscured and misunderstood aspects of the Sadr movement. This includes a unique dataset consisting in social profiles of around 80 key Sadr movement actors, identifying their different forms of social capital and resources (a table summarising this data can be found in Appendix I). Other sources include life story and biographical data drawn from interviews and discussions with Sadrist informants and textual and audio-visual data (media statements and interviews, religious

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[5] Pierre Bourdieu, 'On Symbolic Power,' in Language and Symbolic Power, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 172.
[6] The sectarianization of Iraqi politics has been approached through a similarly Bourdieusian lens by Toby Dodge and Renad Mansour. See, Toby Dodge & Renad Mansour, 'Sectarianization and Desectarianization in the Struggle for Iraq's Political Field,' *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 18:1(2020): 58-69.
[7] As Ali Allawi writes, the nominations for the IGC 'continued to govern the distribution of power subsequently' and 'The first 'cut' was to accept the principle of ethnic and sectarian balance in the governing authority. The Shi'a as a group would hold a slim majority in the Council, reflecting their numerical majority in the country. The Kurds and Sunni Arabs would each have a roughly equal share of 20 percent plus of the seats, again reflecting their relative weighting in the country. Minorities such as the Turkomen and Christian communities would need to be represented.' For more, see Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq,* 164.
[8] Tripp, *A History of Iraq,* 284.
[9] Dodge and Mansour trace the origins of this sectarian logic back to the 'Salah al-Din consensus' emerging from a string of exile opposition meetings starting in 1992 in Salah al-Din, see Dodge & Mansour, 'Sectarianization and Desectarianization in the Struggle for Iraq's Political Field,': 60-61,
[10] Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq,* 168.

statements, articles, books etc.) approached, in the main, ethnographically as contextualised practices.

Another important source has been the 'Qayis al-Khaza'li Papers'.[11] These are intelligence reports from the US-conducted interrogation of Shaykh Qais al-Khaza'li, one of the most important actors in the Sadr movement between 2003 and his capture in 2007. Khaza'li clearly has a particular agenda to foward, particularly given his fractious relationship with Muqtada. These documents were further politicised by the timing of their release.[12] However, the interrogation files are also extremely detailed and can, in some cases, be corroborated by subsequent events or other sources. If properly contextualised, this source can help clarify aspects of the Sadr movement that would otherwise be obscure to scholars limited to open-source material.

## II
## The Sadrists: A Social Movement Emerges

Little is known about the Sadr movement in Iraq as the group's militancy and secrecy have mitigated against in-depth research. Scholars interested in the Sadrists can draw on only a handful of security-focused think-tank papers,[13] a smattering of book chapters and journal articles,[14] and two monographs: Patrick Cockburn's journalistic history of the movement and Nicholas Krohley's account of street-level Jaysh al-Mahdi fighters in south-east Baghdad.[15] Many of these works focus on the paramilitary wing of the movement and its internal splits,[16] while others have homed in on elite dimensions of Sadrist politics by focusing on

[11] 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers: Tactical Interrogation Reports (TIR),' available at *Homeland Security Digital Library*.
[12] This release was calibrated to damage Khaza'li around the time of Iraq's May 2018 elections.
[13] 'Iraq's Muqtada Al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?' *International Crisis Group,* July 11, 2006; 'Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists and the Surge,' *International Crisis Group,* February 7, 2008; Marisa Cochrane, 'The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement,' *Institute for the Study of War,* 2009.
[14] Amatzia Baram 'Sadr the Father, Sadr the Son, the "Revolution in Shiʿism," and the Struggle for Power in the Hawzah of Najaf' in *Iraq Between Occupations,* eds. R. Zeidel, A. Baram, and Achim Rohde (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Peter Harling and Hamid Yassin Nasser, 'The Sadrist Trend: Class Struggle, Millenarianism and *fitna,'* in *The Shiʿa Worlds and Iran*, ed. Sabrina Mervin (London: Saqi, 2007); Pierre-Jean Luizard, 'The Sadrists in Iraq: Challenging the United States, the *Marja'iyya* and Iran,' in *The Shiʿa World and Iran.* Juan Cole, 'The United States and Shiʿite Religious Factions in Post-Ba'thist Iraq,' *Middle East Journal* 57, no. 4 (Autumn, 2003): 543-566; Matthew J. Godwin, 'Political inclusion in unstable contexts: Muqtada al-Sadr and Iraq's Sadrist Movement,' *Contemporary Affairs* 5, no. 3 (July 2012): 448-456.
[15] Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada: Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revival, and the Struggle for Iraq* (New York: Scribner, 2008); Nicholas Krohley, *The Death of the Mehdi Army: The Rise, Fall, and Revival of Iraq's Most Powerful Militia* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2015).
[16] Cochrane, 'The Fragmentation'; and Krohley, *The Death.*

Muqtada and his role as a religious and political leader.[17] Wider dimensions of the movement, such as its cultural and ideological diversity, and other Sadrist actors and forms of practice, have been largely overlooked. In fact, researchers have not, so far, produced detailed accounts of the Sadr trend's institutional structure, financial resources or profiles of key actors in the movement beyond a handful of Muqtada's top lieutenants.[18] In other words, a coherent picture of the Sadr movement and how it functions as a whole seldom comes into focus.

To bring these different components under a single analytical lens, this section approaches the Sadr movement in terms of its organisational structure and composition by a diverse range of resources (forms of capital) acquired via the participation of movement actors in particular domains of social action (fields). This diversity of capitals and their relational structure, which is subject to intra-movement contestation, shapes the nature of authority and relations of power between movement actors. This is particularly important for the Sadr movement, since formal institutions were less crucial in shaping its internal dynamics and politics than the networks of interpersonal relationships that underlay them. In this view, authority, legitimation and access to movement resources were less institutionalised and formalised, and more personalised, attached to individuals and transferred and utilised via the management of interpersonal relationships.[19] The institutional structure of the Sadr movement was, to a large extent, grafted onto this deeper structure of social and symbolic capitals.[20]

Consequently, while this section begins by outlining the Sadr movement's institutional structure, financial resources and materiel (objectified forms of capital) it also looks beyond these features, and to other forms of capital, in order to fully explain how the Sadr movement works. This analysis draws on social profiles of around 80 Sadrist actors who were prominent in the movement during the period of its emergence between 2003-2009. Part of this analysis is also focused on how the pre-war social base of the Sadr movement, constituted primarily by its clerical networks and the institutional structure of the Office of

[17] Cockburn paints a picture of Muqtada as a shrewd political operator who shifts his political strategies to adapt to circumstances, e.g. 'His resources were limited but he deployed them with energy and skill,' Cockburn, *Muqtada,* 127. Similarly, ICG talks of Muqtada as 'fine-tuning his movement's strategies,' see 'Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr,' *ICG,* 24.
[18] Cochrane, 'The Fragmentation'.
[19] Inspired by Elvire Corboz's research on the transmission of clerical authority within international networks. Elvire Corboz, *Guardians of Shiʿism: Sacred Authority and Transnational Family Network* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).
[20] Institutions are not irrelevant, however, they come into the picture to fulfil specific ad hoc functions where informal social networks cannot.

the Martyr al-Sadr (OMS), prefigured certain aspects of the movement's post-2003 mobilisation for insurgency.[21] A conceptual account of the movement is thus developed that explores dynamics of social integration, but also of fragmentation and social disembeddedness, both within and between the movement's different leadership strata, and how these features help explain its shifting and unstable strategic politics.

### *The Sadr Movement's Institutional Structure*

*Figure 1 Sadr movement institutional structure (2003-2014)*

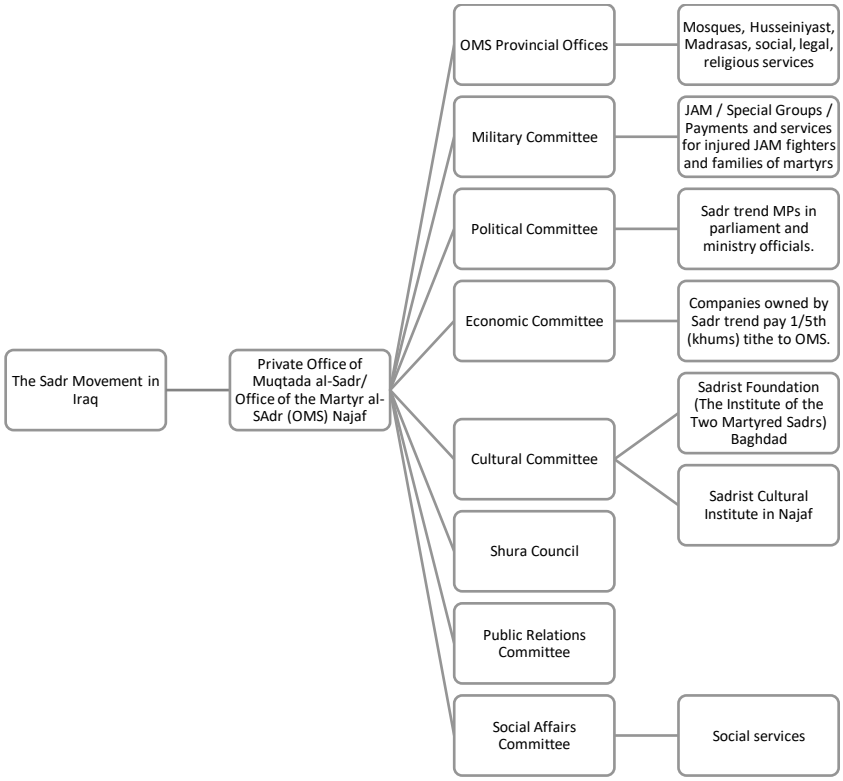


Figure one, above, outlines a basic institutional map of the Sadr movement in Iraq as it developed between 2003 and 2014.[22] Of paramount importance from this institutional

[21] Some have treated the Sadr movement as if it was created *ex nihilo* in 2003. Caroleen Marji Sayej argues that the post-2003 Sadr movement offered 'a new vision for Shiʿite leadership outside the *hawza,*' and neglects to identify continuities and causal relationships between the Sadr II movement and the post-2003 Sadrist mobilisation. See Caroleen Marji Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollah's: Nationalism in Post-Saddam Iraq* (London: Cornell University Press, 2018), 15-16.

[22] Based on a combination of sources including the Qayis al-Khazali Papers and discussions with Sadrist informants and those with first-hand knowledge of the movement's early post-2003 mobilisation, e.g. Elijah J. Magnier, al-Rai's Chief International Correspondent.

perspective is Muqtada's Private Office located in Hayy al-Ishtiraki in Najaf (opposite the Prince al-Ahli Hospital). Muqtada refers to his Private Office as the 'Office of the Martyr al-Sadr,' retaining the symbolic tie to his father's movement of the 1990s. Technically, Muqtada's Private Office had oversight of all other aspects of the movement (in reality, this control was less formal, more diffuse and more internally contested). Muqtada and his closest advisors operated through his Private Office and, as such, it represented the institutional dimension of clerical control of the Sadr movement. In reality, important meetings of senior Sadr trend actors did not always take place at Muqtada's Private Office, but at other locations such as Muqtada's own home which is just a few doors down, or at Sadeq al-Sadr's old home in Hayy al-Hannana, a few blocks to the west (which Muqtada used as a second home and office).[23]

Below the command and control centre in Najaf, sat the various Offices of the Martyr al-Sadr (OMS), spread throughout the provinces in south and central Iraq. The OMS represented the institutional dimension of the clerical networks that functioned as the heart of the movement since its emergence within the Shiʿi religious field in the 1990s.[24] It was thus the central organisational feature of the Sadr movement's pre-war social base, and it shaped the movement's development, and its strategic politics, in crucial ways from 2003. As explored in Chapter Two, the Sadr II movement had developed a network of offices that functioned as a fairly decentralised operation for the collection and distribution of religious duties, provision of services and to manage the staffing of mosques, *ḥusayniyyāt* and madrasas. Baʿthist repression targeting the Sadr II movement, and particularly its *wukala'* networks, further entrenched this decentralised structure as resources and services were collected and distributed within their local contexts.[25]

Conventional accounts of the emergence of the Sadr movement post-2003 have tended to describe a situation wherein Muqtada seized control of this institutional apparatus, and directed it strategically from the top-down to establish his control over the movement and expand its capacities during the early post-invasion weeks and months. Juan Cole, for example, argued that:

> Muqtada al-Sadr, underground in Najaf, saw the fall of the Baʿth coming in the spring of 2003, and arranged for the extensive mosque network of the Sadr Movement to be

[23] 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR – March 25, 2007,' 80-81.
[24] The offices assumed their current name after Sadeq al-Sadr's assassination in 1999.
[25] Based on discussions about the pre-2003 Sadr movement with Dhia al-Asadi. There are also references in the Ba'th Party archives to the regime's monitoring of *wukala'* networks, see Abbas Kadhim, 'The Hawza Under Siege: A Study in the Baʿth Party Archives,' *IISBU Occasional Paper* 1 (June 2013): 34.

> reactivated as soon as the government collapsed under the weight of the Anglo-American invasion.[26]

However, this picture mischaracterises a process that was more decentralised and subject to local forms of control and contestation. It thus contributes to a general misreading of the Sadr movement which overstates Muqtada's unique agency and strategic direction of the movement. In reality, the OMS network sprang back to life organically as the Baʿthist regime crumbled, with junior clerics using extant networks and resources to respond to local needs (services including cleaning streets, health, schools, welfare, security and informal justice).[27] Muqtada eventually seized control of this the network's central organisation and expanded its operations. However, the idea that he assumed immediate control over a highly decentralised network during the chaos of the invasion is improbable.

Rather, the OMS should be understood as an institutional network with a relative degree of autonomy and a high degree of local social embeddedness. Thus, this network was not merely a strategic tool for Muqtada, but also functioned as the site of more local and autonomous forms of power and control, and as the object of struggle for those seeking to stake out positions of influence within the Sadr movement. Obscuring the possibility of divergence between himself and the OMS network is clearly important for Muqtada. This is why he insists on calling his Najaf-based Private Office 'The Office of the Martyr al-Sadr,' while his opponents within the broader Sadrist current refuse to follow suit, maintaining the distinction between Muqtada's personal institutional apparatus and the OMS network.[28]

This struggle was visible in the early post-invasion period. Shaykh Muhammad al-Ya'cubi, who was technically the head of Sadr II's Private Office in Najaf in 2003, attempted to bring the OMS network under his control. Ya'cubi resisted Muqtada's rise, and the struggle between the two led Ya'cubi to formally split with Muqtada as early as 16 July 2003 when he founded Hizb al-Fadhila (the Islamic Virtue Party).[29] However, the fact that Ya'cubi was unable to control the local OMS offices from his position as head of the Sadr II Private Office in Najaf illustrates the weakness of central and institutional control in the Sadr movement. The OMS network also emerged as a site of competition between Muqtada and Iran-based Ayatollah Kazem al-Ha'iri when the latter sought to use his designation as a

[26] Cole, 'The United States': 554-555.
[27] Krohley, *The Death,* 60.
[28] 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR' *Report no. 200243-009*, 25.
[29] Of which he was the spiritual head (having declared himself *ayatollah*).

*marja' taqlīd* for the Sadr trend to seize back control of the network's financial resources (more below).[30]

The principal function of the OMS post-2003 was to coordinate the activities of the Sadr movement in the provinces, to oversee the staffing and salaries for Sadr trend functionaries at local mosques, *hussayniyat* and madrasas, as well as the collection and distribution of religious taxes and other funds, and provision of religious, legal and social services to local communities. The OMS was thus the organisational structure, in addition to the local mosques and *hussayniyat*, through which the Sadr movement's clerical network came into contact with the movement's ordinary followers. It thereby helped create a high degree of social embeddedness between parts of the movement and local constituencies (towns, districts and neighbourhoods).

The OMS network, owing to its cohesive integration into local contexts, was the Sadr movement's most important institutional asset (not, as some have argued, the movement's paramilitary organisation).[31] It enabled powerful forms of local control, organisation and mobilisation which other movements, who lacked similar linkages into local communities, could not match (including the ICP). Local organisational capacity also translated into symbolic legitimacy, flowing from how it allowed the movement to provide services, security and dispute mediation within communities, and the framing of these activities within a broader religious-missionary narrative. Some, but not all, of these functions involved forms of social control and discipline, or more explicitly coercive mechanisms, that also relied on high degrees of local integration and social embeddedness. The OMS network thus built a considerable reservoir of popular support, legitimacy and authority in local contexts.[32]

This local social integration of the Sadr movement through the OMS network had other important effects on the wider movement. First, it helped consolidate clerical control over the movement's local resources and organisational capacities, including their associated forms of symbolic legitimation. Thus, the linkages the OMS structure created were not to the movement as a whole, but concentrated within its clerical networks, and particularly those engaged in routine interactions with the movement's followers in these local domains. As new Sadrist strata emerged, such as intellectuals and politicians, these groups were not

[30] For more, see 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR' *Report no: 200243-009*, 24.
[31] Nicholas Krohley argues that 'as the Sadrists' principle organizational body, the militia was also their most important operational asset.' Krohley, *The Death*, 78.
[32] For discussion of the local functioning of the OMS network, see 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR,' *Report no. 200243-009*, 24.

socially embedded in in the same way. Second, it rendered central control of the movement more difficult as its leaders came to function primarily as brokers between nodes of power that were highly localised but characterised by weaker integration outside these local contexts. And third, the OMS network functioned as the organisational base for the Sadr movement's paramilitary mobilisation which, consequently, came to reflect the same structure of local social embeddedness and weak central control.[33]

These paramilitaries, collectively as Jaysh al-Mahdi, were a new component of the Sadr movement.[34] Krohley has described how the Sadrist militia grew rapidly by recruiting in poor Shiʿi neighbourhoods via mosques and OMS offices, establishing a network of local franchises.[35] The militia came to reflect the characteristics of the Shiʿa underclass, absorbing young males from communities brutalised by the Saddam regime and ravaged by sanctions. Like many socially excluded groups engaged in popular forms of religiosity and social activism, Jaysh al-Mahdi recruits' location on the periphery of socio-economic and political power prefigured a particular cultural orientation. This recast their marginality, and the scorn and derision directed towards them by mainstream Iraqi society, as a moral superiority and purity amid a prevailing cultural decadence. Thus, Jaysh al-Mahdi developed a reputation for its radicalism, brutality and austere social conservatism, embodying a strategy of distinction and separation from the rest of Iraqi society.[36]

From an institutional perspective, Jaysh al-Mahdi was technically under the control and supervision of the Sadr movement's clerical elite. However, in reality, reflecting the organisational base of the OMS, Jaysh al-Mahdi functioned as a bottom-up and highly localised organisation which made it resistant to centralised oversight and control. The militias thus functioned as both a strategic asset and a liability from the perspective of the

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[33] Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining insurgent cohesion and collapse* (London: Cornell University Press, 2014), 7-8.

[34] Sadrists who discussed the origins of Jaysh al-Mahdi with the author claimed the theoretical-theological basis for the militia was developed prior to 2003 by Sadeq al-Sadr. One Sadrist informant told the author: 'The idea of Al-Mahdi Army was deduced from the theory of Grand Ayatollah Sadr II about Imam Al-Mahdi, his occultation and movement after his expected appearance. The discussion of the idea in general (not the formation of an army) was tackled by a 4-volume book entitled "Encyclopaedia of Imam Al-Mahdi". The formation of al-Mahdi Army after 2003 was in response to the US occupation of Iraq (while its theoretical foundations could be traced, though indirectly, to the theorisation of Sadr I and Sadr II).'

[35] Krohley, *The Death,* 79.

[36] Juan Cole has highlighted this dimension of the Sadr movement's early post-2003 politics, writing: 'Muqtada called on May 2 for strict Islamic law to be applied to Iraq's Christians, as well, including the prohibition on bars and on allowing women to appear unveil…[Sadrist] antagonism to the secular middle class values…is often extreme, and has sometimes been expressed in the form of firebombing cinema houses and liquor shops, or at least threatening owners in an effort to make them close.' Cole, 'The United States': 559-560, 565.

clerical elite. On the one hand, its militant resistance to the US occupation generated symbolic legitimacy for the movement. Added to this, Jaysh al-Mahdi gave the clerics a resource they lacked, coercive capital. On the other hand, Jaysh-Mahdi proved undisciplined and difficult to control. Its extremes of violence, particularly during the civil war, hugely damaged the reputation of the Sadr movement as a whole.[37]

Krohley describes the paramilitaries as 'the Sadrists' principal organisational body' and the movement's 'most important operational asset.'[38] However, this interpretation tends to downplay the strategic liabilities that attached to the militia. Moreover, the centrality Krohley places on the institution of Jaysh al-Mahdi obscures the fundamentally religious character of the Sadr movement. The resources that Jaysh al-Mahdi brought to the table were only part of a broader structure that remained fundamentally anchored in the religious field and hegemonized by a clerical network whose own resources, particularly in the form of symbolic legitimation, remained preeminent within the movement. Jaysh al-Mahdi contested this control at various times and with varying degrees of success, but it rarely broke free of clerical leadership altogether.

Rather, when a Jaysh al-Mahdi franchise splintered from Muqtada, it typically did so under new clerical leadership from within the broader Sadr movement (e.g. Shaykh Ahmad Tabataba'i, Shaykh Qais al-Khaza'li and 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq), or under direct clerical leadership from Iran (whose doctrine of *vilāyat-i faqīh* provided a replicable ideological and legitimating framework for militant groups).[39] Those militia groups who fell back exclusively on their coercive capital found their legitimacy rapidly dissipated. They became 'criminal gangs' and were excommunicated and cut off from the movement's material and legitimating resources. Isma'il Hafiz al-Lami, AKA Abu Dura, for example, was cast out of the Sadr movement in 2006 for his militia's insubordination, criminality and extreme sectarian violence. Abu Dura fled to Iran where he became an agent of the IRGC and returned to Iraq in 2010 as a commander in Shaykh Qais al-Khaz'ali's 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (thus, he returned under clerical symbolic leadership).[40]

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[37] Cockburn suggests much of this violence may not have been strategically coordinated by Sadrist leadership, but was a consequence of their lack of control over the militias. This remains a point of dispute. See Cockburn, *Muqtada,* 179-182; and Krohley, *The Death,* 78-79.
[38] Krohley, *The Death,* 78.
[39] Thomas Pierret, 'The Reluctant Sectarianism of Foreign States in the Syrian Conflict,' *The United States Institute for Peace,* Peace Brief 162 (November 18, 2013).
[40] 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR – March 24, 2007,' 74-76. For case of Abu Dura, see 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR March 24, 2007,' 75-75.

The two key institutional dimensions of the Sadr movement (the OMS and Jaysh al-Mahdi) were both characterised by high degrees of social embeddedness in local contexts but comparatively weaker integration at the leadership level. This organisational structure, as Paul Staniland has argued, entails a particular form of leadership as tenuous brokerage between multiple, locally embedded groups that are fairly autonomous in terms of horizontal linkages.[41] Other institutional apparatus which the Sadr movement developed post-2003 thus served two broad functions. First, to attempt to generate greater central control through horizontal integration of local leadership into formalised central structures. And second, to perform functions (or to attempt to perform functions) that required collective action outside local contexts (e.g. the movement's formal party-political apparatus from 2005; economic interactions with the Iraqi state; strategic aspects of coordinating insurgency).

This process involved the creation of various *hayʾāt* (sing. *hayʾa,* committees or bodies) connected to Muqtada's Private Office in Najaf. The most important of these were military, political, economic, cultural affairs, social affairs and public relations. Each committee functioned in its own distinct fashion:

The *military committee* (*al-hay'a al-'askariyya*) sought to provide oversight of Jaysh al-Mahdi and, later, the Special Groups. The committee was run for a period by Shaykh Qais al-Khazali until his split with Muqtada, at which stage Shaykh Jaber al-Khafaji and Shaykh Muhammad al-Sa'di took over. The military committee controlled the distribution of funds and materiel to the Sadr movement's paramilitary groups, as well as payments and services for the families of martyred JAM fighters or those injured in fighting, all via JAM's financial manager, Abu Aya;[42]

The *political committee* (*al-hay'a al-siyyāsiyya)* came into existence once the Sadr movement joined the political process in 2005 and was run by 'Abd al-Mahdi al-Mutayiri (AKA Abu Firas al-Mutayiri). Its function was to oversee the activities of Sadr trend members of parliament, but also those appointed to ministerial positions, or to other functions within the Iraqi civil service. Qais al-Khaza'li described the functioning of the political committee during his interrogation by US intelligence operatives: 'The political committee receives direction from the Najaf OMS [Muqtada's Private Office]. This direction is then passed onto the politicians inside the Government of Iraq to follow through. The political committee only provides oversight and supervises the politicians, relaying

[41] Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion,* 7.
[42] 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR – April 1, 2007,' 151-152.

instructions to members of parliament from the Sadr trend regarding what to bring up and discuss in parliament.'[43] In this way, the Sadr movement's political party and activists remained within the effective control of the movement's clerical leadership;

The *economic committee* (*al-hay'a al-iqtisāḍiyya*) was run by a wealthy merchant family headed by Zaidan Kathir. The committee oversaw companies owned by the Kathir family, and others associated with the Sadr trend, who paid a 1/5th portion of their profits to Muqtada's Najaf-OMS as religious duties. The committee used its influence with Sadr trend government officials and various Iraqi government ministries to secure contracts for the different committee-owned or controlled companies;[44]

The *cultural affairs (hay'a al-shu'ūn al-thaqāfiyya)* committee had oversight of the Sadr trend's various cultural institutions and activities. These included the Sadr trend Cultural Institute in Najaf and the Sadrist Foundation in Baghdad (*mu'assāsat al-ṣadrayn al-shahīdayn*) which produced the movement's various newspapers, magazines, radio station, and JAM-related indoctrination and propaganda materials;

The *social affairs (hay'a al-shu'ūn al-ijtimā'iyya)* committee was designed to centralise oversight of the provision of social services. Such activities were typically coordinated via the local OMS, thus the social affairs committee represented efforts to centralise control over OMS activities more tightly within the Private Office in Najaf;

The *public relations committee* managed Muqtada's meetings with ambassadors and important officials, coordinated relationships with media and TV and managed Muqtada's website and public statements. In 2009, this was under the supervision of the head of Muqtada's Private Office in Najaf, Shaykh Mahmud al-Jiyashi;

The *shura council* is a consultative body of senior clerics whom Muqtada appointed in an advisory capacity on doctrinal religious matters. This unorthodox arrangement within the Shiʿi tradition speaks to Muqtada's lack of the normative religious qualifications to issue fatwa and other religious edicts.

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[43] 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR,' *Report no: 200243-027,* 67-68.
[44] 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR, April 3, 2007*,'* 157-156; and 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR, April 1, 2007,' 152. Revenue generated through these front businesses could be substantial over and above the amounts already outlined. One interrogation report stated: 'asked to estimate the amount of money involved in this enterprise the detainee stated it was too large to guess, he had no "sight" on this money.' On Zaidan Kathir, see 'Zaidan amongst Muqtada and his supporters,' *Kitabat,* June 17, 2019.

### *Sadr Movement Finances and Materiel*

Very little concrete information has ever come to light regarding Sadr trend finances. This is not surprising given that the movement does not publish financial records and much of its income comes from clandestine and/or illicit sources. Thus, while the types of financial resources the movement has drawn on are fairly well known, the significance of each in the overall mix has never been well understood. Sadr trend financing was a frequent topic during the Qais al-Khaza'li interrogation. The details Khaza'li provided should be treated with caution since he could have been motivated to inflate these figures or exaggerate the degree of Iranian support in an effort to discredit Muqtada. Nevertheless, as will be discussed below, the picture that emerges from Khaza'li's account is both uniquely detailed and more consistent with the size and operational breadth of the Sadr movement than previous accounts based on public sources.

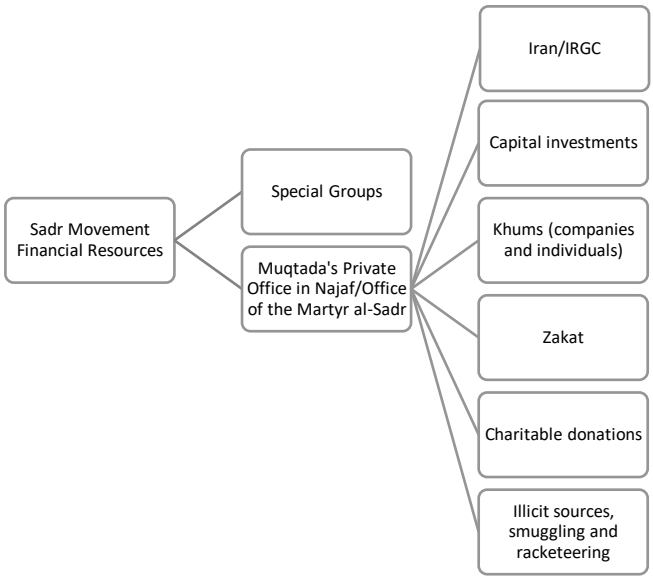
The Sadr movement's financial income came from a variety of sources outlined below in Figure two. One important revenue stream came via the *khums* (the 1/5$^{th}$ contribution made by all Sadr trend followers who were not themselves poor and in need to charitable giving). Since the majority of the Sadrist social base was drawn from the rural and urban Shi'a poor, most of the Sadr trend *khums* comes from a relatively small number of merchant families and companies owned by Sadr trend members. Zakat is another religious duty of charitable giving, and is typically paid to the OMS directly, at Sadr trend mosques or sometimes to reputable *hawza* students who distribute the money locally. Other religious taxes also contribute to the pot, e.g. fines for breaking the Ramadan fast without permission.[45]

The total revenues from charitable giving are difficult to quantify with accuracy. Marisa Cochrane, for example, argued that, according to Adnan Shahmani, a cleric in Sadr's Najaf office, the movement collected 65,000 USD/month in charitable donations. Cochrane considered this amount to represent a 'vast contribution' to Sadr trend finances.[46] However, this assessment appears to radically underestimate the movement's total financial resources (see below). There were also financial resources from illicit sources: from smuggling, extortion and racketeering that implicate Jaysh al-Mahdi in mafia-type practices. In reality, the line between legal and illicit sources was blurred. Pressure from Jaysh al-Mahdi, or corrupt political connections, was an aspect of the Sadr movement's capital investments and helped companies belonging to Sadr movement leaders and their

[45] 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR,' *Report no: TIR-TF17-TSF-0705,* 229-230.
[46] Cochrane, 'The Fragmentation,' 12.

associates compete for lucrative government, reconstruction and private investment contracts.

*Figure 2 Sadr movement financial resources (2003-2009)*




According to the Khaza'li interrogation, the sources outlined above added up to only a third of the Sadr movement's financial resources. This means that clandestine funding via the IRGC constituted the remaining two thirds, at least between 2004-2007. Thus, according to Khaza'li, the Sadr movement's total annual operational budget was approximately 36 million USD or 3 million USD/month. Of this, 2 million USD/month came from Iranian sources (IRGC), totalling 24 million USD/year.[47] This Iranian funding does not include the value of extensive training and weapons provided by the IRGC to Jaysh al-Mahdi fighters.[48] Meanwhile, 1 million USD/month was provided by the revenues generated by activities that fell under the OMS, economic committee, and other illicit sources (making Cochrane's 65,000 USD/month figure appear a drop in the ocean). As the Sadr movement grew into one of Iraq's most powerful social movements and paramilitaries, the figures that Khaza'li provides seem more credible.

[47] 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR,' *Report no: TIR-TF17-TSF-0705,* 229.
[48] The ICG plays down the Iran-IRGC relationship, stating that Muqtada's 'material assets are scanty' and the movement is 'receiving at best limited material support from Iran' because the movement is not fully aligned with Iranian interests, see 'Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr,' *ICG,* i. By contrast, Cochrane has argued that '[t]he Iranians had already been training and funding Iraqi militias throughout 2004 and even 2003, but the Qods Force expanded the program in 2005.' Cochrane, 'The Fragmentation,' 18-19. The information provided in the Khaza'li interrogation supports Cochrane's account. For the more extensive discussion of Jaysh al-Mahdi and SG IRGC training, see 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR,' *Report no: 200243-008*, 21-23; *200243-016*, 43-44; and 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TI, March 25, 2007, 85-86.

Consequently, while much has been made of the Sadr movement's complicated, and at times antagonistic relationship with the Iranian political and clerical establishment, analyses that have downplayed the Sadr movement's Iranian ties (both financial and materiel) could have underestimated the degree of Iranian investment in the movement. In fact, two of the most widely cited sources on the Sadr movement both insist that Jaysh al-Mahdi was essentially a self-funded outfit benefiting from only minimal training and other support from Iranian sources.[49] This in turn tends to distort the degree of Iranian leverage and ability to shape the Sadr movement's political strategies at critical junctures.[50] Whereas, in reality, it seems that IRGC's involvement with Jaysh al-Mahdi was established well before the August 2004 Battle of Najaf and expanded considerably after this point.

### *Beyond Institutions: Social, Cultural and Symbolic Capital in the Sadr Movement*[51]

These formal institutions, committees and objective material resources provide only a partial picture of how the Sadrists functioned as a social movement. Underlying these features were the informal, interpersonal relationships and other forms of social, cultural and symbolic capital. To capture this dimension of the Sadr movement, it was necessary to dig into the social biographies of prominent Sadr trend actors and to develop a picture of their social backgrounds, roles within the movement and ties to other Sadrists.

The importance of social capital in the form of dyadic interpersonal relationships (blood and marriage ties, teacher-people relationships, symbolic investiture etc.) in the transmission of clerical authority in Shiʿi Islamist movements has been explored elsewhere.[52] In most instances, these same processes applied *a fortiori* to the cleric-led Sadr movement, partly because of its clandestine nature. As with mafia-type organisations, dyadic ties were important to maintain secrecy and trust in contexts that required clandestine activity. Also like mafia-type organisations, dyadic ties reflected a relatively flat

[49] According to ICG: 'Even Jaysh al-Mahdi, which one is tempted to see as the Sadrist movement's hard-core, for the most part is self-financed. All members underscore the personal sacrifice they endure on behalf of the cause, for example by purchasing their own weapons… Muqtada occasionally pays his fighters, but the amounts suggest limited and sporadic support.' It is possible this view reflects the self-image Jaysh al-Mahdi fighters prefer to present. 'Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr,' *ICG,* 19.
[50] Cockburn argued: '…President Bush was to denounce the Mehdi Army as an arm of the Quds Brigade in Iraq. His accusation sounded like an Americanised version of the Iraqi habit of seeing the sinister hand of Iranian intelligence behind everything that happened in Iraq. Much of this was paranoia, and allegations of significant Iranian involvement in Iraq were seldom backed by evidence.' Cockburn, *Muqtada,* 134.
[51] Unless stated otherwise, information provided here draws on data collected on Sadr movement actors that is presented in Appendix I.
[52] Corboz, *Guardians of Shiʿism,* 44-45.

hierarchy wherein actors invested with authority were always only one, or two steps removed from the centre (Muqtada), in a highly personalised structure of authority.

Normally, of first importance in Shiʿi clerical movements are blood and marriage ties which constitute the *ḥāshiyya,* the entourage of the *marja'* composed of his immediate family, primarily sons, who, as Ali Allawi describes, '[play] the intermediary role between the religious world and the profane world of government and power.'[53] These ties form a relatively stable core of tightly hierarchised relations around the most senior figure, imbued with the symbolic legitimacy of the clerical family name. However, the Sadr movement was unusual in the comparative weakness of such ties as a feature of Muqtada's personal authority. Of course, the most important blood tie for Muqtada was to his father, the Martyr Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr, and this relationship granted him unparalleled personal charisma and legitimacy within the movement. In addition, Muqtada's brother-in-law, Shaykh Riyad al-Nouri, was another important relationship. Nouri managed Muqtada's Private Office in Najaf post-2003 and was one of the Sadr movement's most senior religious figures and an important Muqtada confidant until his assassination in Najaf in 2008.

However, outside this limited number of cases, very few ties to Muqtada of either blood or marriage featured in the upper echelons of the Sadr movement. For instance, Muqtada is married to the sister of Ja'far al-Sadr, the son of Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. However, Ja'far al-Sadr, while a highly respected intellectual and political figure, has been largely independent from Muqtada and only returned to Iraq from Lebanon in 2009. Muqtada has no children of his own. It is rumoured that he is sterile, but this issue remains taboo and is not discussed in Sadrist circles. Muqtada is also rumoured to have an adopted son, Hashim, who many Sadr trend followers believe to be his real son (Sadrists often refer to Muqtada as Abu Hashim as a sign of affection).[54] However, Hashim is too young to be involved in the movement in anything other than a symbolic role. In fact, the only other Sadr family member to play a prominent role in the movement is Muqtada's nephew, Ahmed al-Sadr, who rose to prominence as a non-clerical political operative around 2015. Ahmed al-Sadr has no background in the *hawza* and plays the traditional role of the son of a *marja'* in mediating between Muqtada and the profane world of political activism.

[53] Allawi, *The Occupation,* 113.
[54] Yousef al-Sabihawi, 'Ya Abu Hashim,' *YouTube,* March 27, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2VmGb2MwZBI&list=RD2VmGb2MwZBI&index=6

An important consequence of this feature of the Sadr movement was that the core of its leadership post-2003 was not constituted by individuals tied to Muqtada by blood or marriage, but by former students of Sadeq al-Sadr who, via their own relationship to the martyred Ayatollah, had their own, relatively independent legitimating resources. The Shiʿi religious field also valued their greater age and more advanced levels of religious training in the *hawza*. Nearly all of Muqtada's senior aides and top operatives (with the exception of JAM commanders), were students of Sadr II: Shaykh Mustafa al-Ya'cubi; Shaykh Qais al-Khaz'ali; Shaykh Muhammad al-Ya'cubi; Shaykh Ahmad Tabataba'i; Shaykh Jabar al-Khafaji; Shaykh Adnan al-Shahmani; Shaykh Ahmad Shaibani; and even Muqtada's brother-in-law Shaykh Riyad al-Nouri. This configuration of capitals (social, cultural and symbolic) within the clerical leadership of the movement helps explain the lack of internal coherence and the fissiparous nature of Muqtada's authority. It allowed for sequential fragmentations as these actors broke away, with some establishing their own movements, political parties and militias (Muhammad al-Ya'cubi declared himself Ayatollah and broke from Muqtada as early as July 2003, followed by similar splits with Qais al-Khaza'li, Muhammad Tabataba'i, Adnan al-Shahmani and Ahmad Shaibani).

This is not to say family ties were not important in the wider movement, only that they were not a core feature of how Muqtada built out his personal authority. In fact, family ties by blood and marriage were a key element of Sadrist networks. However, these ties often functioned as nodes of competing loyalty where rival power centres could emerge, rather than to consolidate or extend Muqtada's own authority. Consider, for example, the brothers Qais and Laith al-Khaza'li, who worked together to establish paramilitary and political groups that rivalled Muqtada's movement. Or, consider the 'Araji brothers, Shaykh Hazim al-'Araji and Baha al-'Araji, who formed a clerical-political combo. Shaykh Hazim al-'Araji ran the Kadhimiya wing of Jaysh al-Mahdi, turning it into a semi-autonomous militia. Meanwhile, his brother became a senior Sadr trend politician, eventually expelled from the movement following a corruption probe in August 2015.

While Muqtada lacked an extensive network of blood and marriage ties within the movement, he nevertheless remained its symbolic epicentre and personal proximity to Muqtada granted authority and access to the movement's resources. This dynamic, however, sat in tension with the local forms of organisation and control that characterised the organisational bases of the movement in the OMS and Jaysh al-Mahdi. Thus, while fairly autonomous forms of control and authority could be built within the movement within local contexts, the higher up the movement's ranks an actor moved, and the more

extricated from their local contexts they became, the more dependent they were on personal ties to Muqtada for their status within the movement. Thus, in addition to potential clerical rivals emerging within the leadership strata, Muqtada also faced potential rivals emerging from the bottom up in local contexts.

This highly personal mode of authority granted Muqtada the power of effective excommunication. He could, in other words, set someone outside the movement, cutting them off from material and legitimating resources, simply by withdrawing his personal contact. In fact, reputational and highly symbolic attacks, as opposed to physical violence, have been more common strategies by which Muqtada and his allies prevent the emergence of rivals within the movement.[55] This practice is more complicated when a rival possesses independent legitimating resources and thus acts as a relatively autonomous, and potentially rival, source of authority (e.g. a rival cleric versus a Jaysh al-Mahdi commander).

The case of Shaykh Muhammad Tabataba'i illuminates this complex and contested nature of authority in the Sadr movement.[56] Tabataba'i came from a traditional clerical family (that of the Iranian Grand Ayatollah Allameh Tabataba'i d. 1981), he trained to a high level in the Najafi *hawza*, and he was amongst the most prominent of Sadr II's students. These were all valued forms of capital within the Sadr movement and Shiʿi religious field, granting Tabataba'i a considerable amount of power and authority on his own account. Thus, he emerged post-2003 as one of the Sadr movement's most important religious leaders, acting as *khaṭib al-juma'* at al-Kufa Mosque. He also became one of Muqtada's closest advisors.

However, the Muqtada-Tabataba'i relationship soured in mid-2006 when the latter delivered a now-infamous sermon at Friday prayers in which he cast doubts on Muqtada's religious credibility (known as the 'Speech of the Calf').[57] Muqtada's response to this challenge is a fascinating case study in skilful manipulation of symbolic power via interpersonal ties, but it also reveals the limits of his own authority. Given Tabataba'i's high standing in the Sadr current, Muqtada could not simply eliminate or expel him from the movement. Instead, in a surprising move, he invited Tabataba'i to deliver the sermon at al-

[55] 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR – April 18, 2007,' 345.
[56] Khaza'li claims to have written the sermon which Tabataba'i delivered, see 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR,' *Report no: TIR-TF17-TSF-0705*, 214-219.
[57] This speech spoke of a bull who was equivalent to an *ayatollah* and rightfully capable of running the country from a religious perspective; in comparison to a calf (Muqtada) trying to run the country in the place of a bull.

Kufa Mosque the following Friday, telling the cleric that there was no bad blood between them and that they remained 'brothers'. However, when the day came, Muqtada appeared himself to lead the Friday prayers, placing Tabataba'i physically behind him during the ceremony. This was both a performance of Muqtada's primacy as a religious authority, but also of the harmony between himself and Tabataba'i. Tabataba'i was manipulated into a symbolic display whereby his legitimating resources were made to work for the reassertion of Muqtada's preeminence.

The key actors in the Sadr movement's paramilitary wing tended to possess an entirely different combination of social capitals when compared with the clerical leadership. Jaysh al-Mahdi commanders were typically young men lacking experience in the *hawza* or in militant operations, and without ties of blood or marriage to the clerical families who hegemonized the movement's leadership. For instance, Abu Muhammad Shibl AKA Shibl al-Zaidi – who was commander of Jaysh al-Mahdi during the Battle of Najaf in 2004 – 'had no background whatsoever' that prepared him for this role, 'he has no clue about Islam or the *hawza*, he is a killer.'[58] Similarly, Akram al-Ka'bi was a very young man when he became Commander in Chief of Jaysh al-Mahdi, having no background as a militant and only very limited experience in the Najafi *hawza*. Isma'il Hafiz al-Lamai AKA Abu Dura, Kazem al-Issawi AKA Abu Do'aa, and 'Abbas al-Kufi, had neither militant nor *hawza* backgrounds. Kufi, for instance, was an electrician prior to his elevation to one of the most senior Jaysh al-Mahdi positions.

A Jaysh al-Mahdi commander grew in power and prestige by monopolising coercive capital in highly localised contexts, i.e. the communities where they exerted control, imposed security and brokered the flow of resources in and out of their neighbourhoods. They sought to wrap this coercive power in the symbolic legitimation of the 'White Lion,' 'resistance' to the occupying force and via the imposition of strict Islamic mores (a version of the morality police) in neighbourhoods they controlled.[59] However, translating this locally-anchored power into more senior positions in Jaysh al-Mahdi's hierarchy entailed stepping out from, and above, this local context of street-level, or neighbourhood-level, web of social relations. Doing so typically depended on the development of dyadic ties with clerical patrons (e.g. Shaykh 'Ali Smeism was instrumental in the rise of both Abu Muhammad Shibl and Akram al-'Ka'bi in Jaysh al-Mahdi). Since Jaysh al-Mahdi fighters lacked blood or

[58] Michael Knights, 'Iraq's Expanding Militia Army,' *CTC Sentinel,* August 2019. https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2019/08/CTC-SENTINEL-072019.pdf
[59] Cole, 'The United States': 554.

marriage ties to the clerical class, their elevation hinged on recognition for their actions, their 'readiness to execute orders, and a lot of courage' as one explained.[60]

The contrasting backgrounds and resources that characterised the clerical leadership and Jaysh al-Mahdi inevitably resulted in tensions within the movement. In the broadest sense, this divide ran roughly between those whose primary strength lay in producing symbolic capital; and those who possessed an abundance of coercive resources. Unlike intra-clerical struggles, Jaysh al-Mahdi commanders had relatively few independent sources of symbolic capital, and what legitimating resources they did possess were anchored in highly local contexts. Consequently, it was relatively easy for Muqtada to demote or entirely excommunicate Jaysh al-Mahdi commanders, cutting them off from the movement's militant and legitimating resources (especially if he feared they were gaining too much local popularity in sensitive areas such as Sadr City). This applied even to the most senior commanders e.g. Abu Muhammad Shibl was expelled from the movement in 2005; Akram al-Ka'bi was expelled in 2007; and Kazem al-Issawi AKA Abu Do'aa was expelled unexpectedly in May 2019. In fact, the further Jaysh al-Mahdi commanders rose up the ranks, the more they were extricated from their localised street-level contexts, the more too they became dependent on their ties to the clerical leadership to sustain their positions and, thus, the more vulnerable they were to clerical excommunication.

However, symbolic capital did not always trump coercive power when the two came into direct conflict. For example, in 2008 Shaykh Riyad al-Nouri, Muqtada's brother-in-law and member of his inner circle, wrote a letter to Muqtada calling for Jaysh al-Mahdi to be disbanded and extremists to be expelled from the movement.[61] Shortly after, on 11 April 2008, Nouri was assassinated by gunmen near his home in Najaf while returning from Friday prayers. However, such cases of militia-on-cleric violence were rare and could reflect intra-clerical struggles that instrumentalised the coercive resources of the militia, as much as clerical-militia confrontations. Alternatively, the Nouri case could reflect the radical nature of his challenge to the militia's status within the Sadr movement (it simply is not known who was behind Nouri's assassination).

The absence of actors with militant or jihadi operational backgrounds amongst Jaysh al-Mahdi is another feature of the movement with important implications. Islamist movements, especially those that are militant or have paramilitary wings, typically have a prominent non-

[60] Sadrist informant (on condition of anonymity), discussion with the author, 15 August, 2017.
[61] Cochrane, 'The Fragmentation,' 35.

clerical stratum whose prestige and standing attaches to their practical jihadi experience, knowledge of tactical and strategic aspects of guerrilla warfare, and the social networks that facilitate clandestine operations. One need not look far to find such cases in Shiʿi Islamist movements, icons who achieved legendary status as militant commanders, e.g. Hadi al-'Ameri (Badr), Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (Kata'ib Hizbullah) or Imad Mughniyah (Hizbullah). Such actors introduce distinct forms of social, cultural and symbolic capital into Islamist movements, contesting clerical hegemony not only over the production of symbolic legitimation, but also over control of a movement's militant resources.

This feature facilitated Iranian penetration of the Sadr movement. The actors who possessed valuable resources in terms of militant experience and social networks were invariably those connected with ISCI/Badr and the IRGC. Thus, the Sadr movement's reliance upon these individuals created openings for IRGC influence and leverage within the Sadr movement's paramilitary wing. Both Abu Sajjad and Muhammad Karim Mahud, for instance, were IRGC/Badr operatives who launched jihadi operations against the Baʿthist regime from Iran. Sajjad, in particular, had extensive experience in clandestine operations in the marshlands and areas of south Iraq. Neither Sajjad or Mahud were Sadrists in any strict sense, but they became involved in the movement because of the access they granted to militant resources. However, they nevertheless came to occupy strategically important positions, with Abu Sajjad even becoming Ishraf of Jaysh al-Mahdi for a period in 2004-2005. Again, these social networks between Jaysh al-Mahdi, Badr and the IRGC throw into doubt the view of the Sadrist militia as entirely unsophisticated, self-reliant and fairly autonomous from Iranian-linked groups and the IRGC.

The picture of the Sadrists, as the group emerged in Iraq from 2003, is thus one of a complex movement composed of institutions and resources anchored in various social contexts and spheres of action. Muqtada was the symbolic epicentre of the movement, but this did not manifest in tight central control or a uniquely powerful strategic agency for the movement's leader. Rather, the movement's resources were largely anchored in local contexts, and Muqtada's leadership consisted in tenuous forms of mediation and brokerage between various local leaderships within distinct interests and objectives with little horizontal integration between these factions.

Muqtada's own authority was vulnerable to challenges along two dimensions. First, from within the clerical leadership, and second, from the bottom up via these local sites of organisation and control. Attempts to institutionalise and regularise greater horizontal

integration, and thus to provide greater central control over the movement, were only partially effective. They were constrained, in part, by the underlying structure of authority in the movement which remained highly personalised and rooted in the management of social relationships with Muqtada. As the Sadr movement became engaged in new domains of practice (primarily political and intellectual), the movement's resources would become further diversified. This would also introduce new dynamics of fragmentation and contestation of the movement's politics, as new Sadrist leadership factions emerged who often shared very little in terms of social linkages, interests and cultural and political perspectives with other elements of the movement.

## III
## Strategies of the Sadr Movement (2003-2009): Between Messianic Militancy and Politics

The strategies of the Sadr movement become explicable when its organisational structures and diverse resources are situated in relation to the particular domains of social action in which it competed for influence and power.[62] Thus, the view of the Sadr movement outlined above, as a movement composed of a range of institutions and different species of social capital, can now be interpreted via the mediating structures of social fields. This was a radically shifting structural landscape, broken, transformed and rebuilt in new configurations by the multitude of forces – internal and external – who contested power in Iraq post-2003. The strategies of the Sadr movement both shaped, and were shaped by, these processes in profound ways. There was no monological Sadrist strategic practice, but a multitude of competing strategic visions and practices attached to, and shaped by, the social logics of particular fields.

### *The Field of Violence, Jaysh al-Mahdi and Iran*

The centrality of violence and physical coercion to the Sadr movement's strategy of power between 2003-2009 is undeniable. However, it is a mistake to explain this centrality only in terms of inherent features of the Sadr movement (its ideological makeup or the radicalism of its young fighters). Rather, the relationship between violence and politics was a more

[62] For a field-based approached to interpreting the Sadr movement, see, Harling, 'The Sadrist Trend,' 283.

general feature of the struggle for power in post-2003 Iraq, so much so that it becomes helpful to talk of a field of violence, i.e. a domain of struggle over forms of coercive capital. This struggle centres on attempts to define and legitimise (or de-legitimise) violence, and to bring that violence to bear as a currency of power in other domains (political, economic, religious etc.). The struggle to define the boundaries of the field of violence, to prescribe its participants and the limits of its coercive power, has been the central struggle of post-2003 Iraq.

The intimate relationship between violence and politics in Iraq clearly pre-dates the 2003 invasion. The Baʿthist regime was uniquely violent amongst Arab counterparts in terms of the extremes of violence entailed by its practice of power, and this necessarily left an imprint on Iraqi society that carried forward into the post-2003 period.[63] Nevertheless, the field of violence, and the conditions that rendered its coercive capital a preeminent resource in the construction of power post-2003, was a necessary creation of the invasion itself. The use of violence to remove the old regime made violence, and the capacity for violence, the fulcrum of power, the reservoir of authority upon which all the artifices of the new political order ultimately depended. In other words, the invasion made political power a predicate of violence. To exist politically, to participate in the unfolding struggle to define the new rules of the game that constituted the emerging political field, depended crucially on a capacity for violence.

Jaysh al-Mahdi quickly emerged as the Sadr movement's coercive resource. The militia enabled the Sadrists to compete in the field of violence and thus participate in the unfolding struggle for power. This dependence on violence was augmented by the Sadrists' exclusion from the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), meaning exclusion from the formal process of shaping the rules and institutions of the new political field. However, as the new political field struggled for definition, the Sadrists' capacity for violence made the movement more powerful and influential politically than many of the participants in the IGC who lacked coercive capacities (such as the ICP). The Sadrists could impose their own rules, gather resources and taxes and liquidate political opponents or rivals in the symbolic marketplace (clerics and intellectuals) simply as a function of their coercive capacities and without recourse to any formal legal or political structures.[64]

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[63] Kanan Makaiya, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq* (London: University of California Press, 1989).
[64] Cole, 'The United States': 554-555.

The field of violence was more than simply a competition over the resources for physical coercion. It also had a powerful symbolic dimension. The Sadr movement's violent challenge to the coalition forces, which culminated in the Battle of Najaf (August 2004), was never a straightforward military contest (which the Sadr movement could never hope to win). Rather, it becomes explicable, in part, as a strategy aimed at the accumulation of forms of symbolic capital available within the field of violence, e.g. those associated with narratives of anti-imperialism and 'resistance' to the foreign occupier and the symbolic differentiation from other Shiʿi Islamist and secularist forces who 'collaborated' with the US-imposed order.

The Sadrist strategy of violence also sought to perpetuate the conditions in which coercive capital would continue to function as a preeminent or meta-structuring principle of power. This was of vital interest given the movement's exclusion from the formal political process. However, it also reflected the Sadr movement's lack of resources required for professional politics. What the Sadrists inherited from the Sadr II phenomenon was a prophetic religious movement that lacked the political and intellectual trappings of other groups such as al-Daʿwa and SCIRI. By contrast, the Sadrists were rich in coercive capital vis-à-vis their political and religious competitors. In other words, perpetuating social conditions in which violence remained a precondition of other forms of power (political, religious, economic, cultural) played to the Sadrists' strengths.

Iran was a key protagonist in the field of violence post-2003, both as an exporter of coercive capital and as a direct participant in violence. It was primarily through their joint participation in this field that the Sadr movement and Iran became entangled in relationships of cooperation and conflict that shaped Sadrist strategies in important ways. This relationship, and the field of violence as the primary terrain on which it unfolded, dates back to the period immediately after the fall of the Saddam regime, not, as some have it, to the period following the Battle of Najaf in August 2004. Cockburn, for instance, argues that Iranian intelligence only started 'to increase its influence in the Sadrist movement and Mehdi Army' from 2005, and that this relationship was, to some extent, forced by US policy: 'the U.S. accusations of Iranian complicity with Muqtada were to a degree self-fulfilling.'[65]

Thus, a matter of months after the invasion, Muqtada and some of his closest aides (including Qais al-Khaza'li) made an unofficial trip to Iran to attend a memorial event for

[65] Cockburn, *Muqtada,* 167-167 & 167.

Ayatollah Khomeini. During this trip, the group met with two Iranian intelligence officials, Hajji Yousef (Hajji Yousef was Deputy Commander of the Quds Force under General Qasem Soleimani) and Shaykh Ansari.[66] It was during these initial meetings that the first plans were discussed for the Sadr movement to receive Iranian funding.[67] An official 10-day visit to Iran by Muqtada and his entourage (Shaykh Mustafa al-Yaqubi, Shaykh Qais al-Khaza'li, Shaykh Ahmad al-Sheibani and 'Abbas al-Kufi) occurred later in June 2003. During this visit, the purpose of which was to familiarise the Iranian government with OMS and Jaysh al-Mahdi, Muqtada held meetings with Iranian government officials, Ayatollah Kazem al-Ha'iri and Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani. Soleimani told Muqtada's group that the IRGC wanted to financially support their militant operations. The IRGC made an offer of between 750,000-1 million USD/month in financial support.[68]

Muqtada was initially extremely cautious about receiving these funds, and reportedly set conditions designed to preserve his freedom of action, conditions to which the IRGC agreed. Even so, Muqtada was keen to appear aloof from Iranian influence. To this end, he made Khaza'li the conduit for the Iranian connection. Hajji Yousef and Shaykh Ansari made trips to Iraq in late 2003, ostensibly in the capacity of representatives to the Cultural Affairs Office of the OMS in Najaf. In reality, they were finalising the specifics for the transfer of money which began at this time. The amounts varied, but were typically around 1 million USD/month, transferred via the *hawala* system.[69] Thus, the relationship with the IRGC was already in place by the time of the Battle of Najaf in July-Sept 2004. In fact, Khaza'li confirmed during his interrogation that both Hajji Yousef and Shaykh Ansari were present on the ground in Najaf during the battles with coalition forces between July-September 2004. Shaykh Ansari took part in combat operations with Jaysh al-Mahdi, while Hajji Yousef worked on assessing Jaysh al-Mahdi's operational needs and coordinating the supply of weapons to the Sadrist militia via smuggling routes in south Iraq.[70]

The heavy losses suffered by Jaysh al-Mahdi during the Battle of Najaf altered the Sadr movement's relationship with Iran in three important respects. First, Muqtada became a

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[66] 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR – March 21, 2007,' 19-20.
[67] Cockburn discusses Iranian media reports of this trip, but he downplays the importance of the money and resources that may have flowed to Jaysh al-Mahdi as a result. Cockburn, *Muqtada,* 134. The Khaz'ali interrogations provide a more detailed account. 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR – March 25, 2007,' 85-86; 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR – March 23, 2007,' 63-35.
[68] 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR – March 25, 2007,' 85.
[69] 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR – March 25, 2007,' 85. On the use of the *hawala* system to transfer funds, see 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR – April 1, 2007,' 28.
[70] 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR – March 23, 2007,' 64-65.

wanted man, hunted by the Ayad 'Allawi government and coalition forces. He was forced into hiding for six months, moving between safehouses in Baghdad. He could not return to Najaf given the resentment that had built there against him owing to the destruction wrought there by the fighting with coalition forces. Muqtada's ability to control the wider movement was thus diminished. He was increasingly reliant on Khaza'li as his conduit to the wider movement and Iran. Khaza'li had been approached by Iranian intelligence to act as a 'pressure valve' in the Muqtada-Iran relationship as far back as June 2003, the Iranians wanted an insurance policy if Muqtada proved difficult to manipulate. Khaza'li thus began to emerge as a rival force. However, in using his relationship with Iran to build his own power base with greater autonomy from Muqtada, Khaza'li simultaneously became more dependent on the IRGC and more anchored in the field of violence where his resources were primarily located. The effect of this split with Muqtada was thus to pivot parts of the Sadr movement's paramilitary networks toward Iran.

Second, was the broader fragmentation of Jaysh al-Mahdi and Muqtada's progressive loss of control over parts of the movement's paramilitary wing. Shortly after the Battle of Najaf, there was a meeting between Muqtada and the heads of several of the most powerful fighting units in Jaysh al-Mahdi. At this meeting, it was decided to reconstitute these groups in a more effective military structure, breaking them out of Jaysh al-Mahdi and giving them a greater degree of separation from Muqtada.[71] It is not clear whether Muqtada welcomed this arrangement as a means of distancing himself publicly from militant activities, or if this new arrangement was forced on him by commanders that sensed his weakened position at this time (these two interpretations are not mutually exclusive). In any case, this point marks the emergence of the so-called Special Groups (SGs), a force that grew to 5,000 elite militant fighters and over which Khaza'li had operational control.[72]

Initially, SGs' funding was still routed through Muqtada who designated half of the money transferred from the IRGC for SGs' use.[73] However, the SGs were operationally autonomous from Jaysh al-Mahdi and, it seems, from Muqtada too. They were receiving weapons and training directly from Iran as early as late 2004, and the IRGC trusted SGs with more sensitive weapons systems and training that was not made available to Jaysh al-

[71] 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR – March 23, 2007,' 64-65.
[72] 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR – March 24, 2007,' 70. The 5,000 figure was given by Khaza'li for the size of SG around the time of his capture, see 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR – March 28, 2007,' 121.
[73] 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR – April 1, 2007,' 151.

Mahdi. According to Khaza'li's interrogation, Iran set SGs' strategic objectives, but left tactical operational decisions to SG commanders:

> Although Iran provides support, they do not dictate the targets for SGs. Iran does provide suggestions for target selection, but does not get specific. For example, Iran suggested focusing attention on Basra and attacking British forces to force a withdrawal of British troops. This would place American forces in a critical situation and increase the likelihood of a withdrawal by Americans.[74]

Thus, the question that has often bedevilled observers, namely, to what extent the SGs were really autonomous from the mainstream Sadr movement, is complex. Financially, Muqtada retained control over the Iranian connection. However, operationally the SGs grew increasingly autonomous from Muqtada and more integrated into the IRGC's transnational militant network. As the Muqtada-Khaza'li relationship deteriorated, it seems Muqtada lost financial control over the SGs too, with Khaza'li and the SGs having achieved a more complete break with the mainstream Sadr movement by mid-2006.[75]

The third, and related alteration in the Sadr movement-Iran relationship that flowed from the Battle of Najaf was the expansion of Iranian support (finance, weapons and training) for paramilitary groups within the Sadrist trend (both Jaysh al-Mahdi and SGs). Post-Battle of Najaf, Iranian financial support rose from 1 million to 2-3 million USD/month. It was also at this point that Jaysh al-Mahdi and SGs fighters started being sent to Iran for training at IRGC bases. Following the Battle of Najaf, IRGC weapons smuggling to Jaysh al-Mahdi and SGs also stepped up a level. This operation was run by Abu Sajjad al-Gharawi, a native of al-'Amarah and a seasoned jihadi operator who conducted clandestine operations against the Baʿthist regime. The Gharawi operation ran in parallel with the Sheibani network, run by Gharawi's friend, Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani, another seasoned jihadi operative and Badr commander working for the IRGC. There was, therefore, considerable interpenetration between the Sadr movement and the IRGC and other IRGC-linked Shiʿi Islamist movements within Jaysh al-Mahdi's operational networks. This was a factor in IRGC leverage over the movement.[76]

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[74] 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR – April 11, 2007,' 145.
[75] There is considerable disagreement regarding when the Muqtada-Khaz'ali split occurred. There are theories that the split was a deliberate strategy by Muqtada to put public distance between himself and the SGs. Magnier argues that the split did not occur until after Khaza'li's arrest in March 2007 (see, Joel Wing, 'Inside The Moqtada Al-Sadr – Qais Khazali Split,' *Musings on Iraq,* January 5, 2015). However, the Qayis al-Khazali Papers contradict this line of thought, pointing to a gradual deterioration in the relationship between Khaza'li and Muqtada following the Battle of Najaf in 2004. According to the Khaza'li interrogation, Muqtada had lost control and influence over the SGs by early 2006. See, 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR,' *Report no: 200243-044*, 112.
[76] 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR,' *Report no: 200243-016*, 42-44; and *Report no: 200243-022*, 56-57.

This relationship between the Sadr movement and Iran in the field of violence gave Iran considerable leverage over the movement and this shaped Sadrist strategic politics in key ways. The development of Sadr movement strategy vis-à-vis the political process in 2005 is one illustrative case of effective Iranian pressure. Initially, Muqtada was resistant to the idea of participating in elections that had US support, fearing this would undermine his legitimacy as a resistance leader. However, when Muqtada sent a delegation to Iran to discuss the matter, both Qassem Soleimani and Hajji Yousef repeatedly impressed upon Muqtada's emissary the importance of joining the political process, or for Muqtada to at least strike a neutral position. Muqtada was surprised and angered by the Iranian pressure, but following consultations with his top advisors, he eventually relented.[77]

However, having moved his stance on the electoral process in general, Muqtada was initially reluctant to join the Shiʿi Islamist bloc (United Iraqi Alliance, UIA). Rather, he opted to reach out to Harith Sulayman al-Dhari and attempted to broker an alliance with the Sunni Association of Muslim Scholars (Hayat al-ʿUlamaʾ al-Muslimin). However, again, Muqtada came under intense pressure from the movement's Iranian connections, to join the Sistani-backed UIA (Iran was keen to unify all Shiʿi Islamist forces under a single umbrella). Since Dhari proved less than enthusiastic about a potential alliance with the Sadr movement, and Muqtada was backed into a corner, he once again relented and fell into line.[78]

Even more significant than its political leverage, was the Iranian role in directly regulating the field of violence itself. Most revealing of this function was the IRGC's brokering of ceasefires between Jaysh al-Mahdi, the Iraqi government and other Shiʿi Islamist factions during the violence between these actors in 2007-2008. Thus, on two occasions in 2008 (in March and April), al-Daʿwa and ISCI sent delegations to Tehran to plead with Qassem Soleimani to intervene and negotiate ceasefires in which Jaysh al-Mahdi and SGs would stand down and bring an end to the violence in Basra and Sadr City.[79] Where Muqtada's own calls for Jaysh al-Mahdi to stand down had proven ineffective, Qassem Soleimani proved the indispensable actor in finally bringing the fighting to a close. Thus, Cochrane is only partly exaggerating when she argued that these episodes 'highlighted the extent to which Qassem Soleimani and the IRGC-QF controlled levels of violence in Iraq.'[80]

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[77] 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, April 3, 2007,' 155-157.
[78] Muqtada's interactions with Harith Sulayman al-Dhari are discussed in the Khaza'li interrogation, see 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR,' *Report no: 200243-009*, 25
[79] Cochrane, 'The Fragmentation, 32-33.
[80] Cochrane, 'The Fragmentation, 33.

Thus, those who have argued that the Sadr movement is antagonistic toward Iran, or even anti-Iranian, may have placed too much emphasis on the movement's rhetoric, as opposed to observing how the movement behaves strategically in specific critical episodes. Nevertheless, the Sadr movement's relationship with Iran remained fairly contained to the field of violence and mediated via the IRGC. Thus, as the paramilitary groups increasingly slipped out of Muqtada's control, the IRGC's leverage over Muqtada also necessarily diminished. Moreover, the IRGC's dealt fundamentally in coercive capital, meaning that comparatively little Iranian support flowed to the Sadr movement's social, cultural and religious activities. Nor could the Iranians easily displace the centrality of the Najafi *hawza* and the *marja'iyya* of Sadeq al-Sadr as the central forms of social and symbolic capital for the Sadr movement as a whole.

In fact, when speaking to senior Sadr movement actors outside of Jaysh al-Mahdi, their most common critique of Iran's relationship with the Sadr movement, and Iraq more generally, is that the IRGC only exported weapons and violence to Iraq, and did comparatively little in terms of supporting the Sadr movement's other endeavours. The strategic shift from militant to 'cultural resistance' (explored below), therefore, also represented a shift towards investment in social fields where the Sadr movement enjoyed greater autonomy from Iran, the IRGC and even other Shiʿi Islamist groups (who penetrated the Sadr movement via its militant networks). During his interrogation, Khaza'li was asked what would happen to the Sadr movement if Iranian funding was withdrawn altogether, and his response points to precisely this dynamic: 'It would not have any effect on the OMS side of the movement, but it would have a great and negative effect on Jaysh al-Mahdi.'[81] Thus, understanding the Sadr movement-Iranian relationship is not primarily a question of identifying the contours of a coherent Sadrist ideological orientation, but of unpacking how this relationship has functioned through particular social networks and fields of practice.

### *The Shiʿi Religious Field: Prophets and Priests and the Struggle for Religious Hegemony*

The centrality of violence as an augmenting aspect of Sadrist strategies should not obscure the fact that the movement was dominated by its clerical leadership whose practices belonged primarily to the religious field. This clerical stratum was not typically endowed with

[81] 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR, April 3, 2007', 168.

coercive capital, and, insofar as coercive capital was instrumentalised within their social practices, it had also to be subordinated to the symbolic authority of the religious field. Thus, the field of violence was typically ancillary to the religious field from the perspective of the Sadr movement's strategic practices. This meant that the movement's modes authority and legitimation were fundamentally anchored in religious-metaphysical sources and were shaped by intra-field religious struggles. Consequently, those who claim the Sadr movement embodied a '"lay" interpretation of Islam – much like Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shariati did in Iran before the revolution' have mistaken this intra-religious struggle for quite different phenomenon that arises from Islamist participation in the intellectual field.[82]

Superficially, in the early post-invasion years, it appeared that the field of violence was indeed the central domain shaping Sadrist strategies and that the conflict between Jaysh al-Madhi and coalition forces, culminating in the 2004 Battle of Najaf, was the central struggle in which the Sadr movement was implicated. In reality, the conflict between Jaysh al-Mahdi and coalition forces was a secondary effect of struggles whose logic belonged primarily to the Shiʿi religious field. This was the prophets versus priests dynamic outlined in Chapter Two. In this intra-religious struggle, the Sadr movement deployed coercive capital to seize control of the key institutions, sacred spaces and material resources of the Najafi *hawza*. However, the enduring preeminence of symbolic over coercive power in the Shiʿi religious field appeared to be restored by the triumphant return of Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani to Najaf in August, bringing an end to fighting in the city.

The Sadrists' conflict with the *marja'iyya* began with violence.[83] On 10 April, a crowd of Muqtada's supporters attacked and murdered 'Abd al-Majid al- Khoei, the elder son of Ayatollah Sayyid Abul-Qassim al-Khoei (*marja' taqlīd* in Najaf from 1971-1992). The incident occurred outside the Imam 'Ali shrine in Najaf and, during the same episode, Haydar al-Rufay'i al-Kalidar, the caretaker or guardian of the shrine, was also killed and the shrine's sacred key confiscated by the Sadrists. Coercive force was used again on 15 October, 2003 when Sadrist militiamen tried to invade the shrines of Imams Husayn and 'Abbas in Karbala, disrupting the ability of the *marja'iyya* to collect money from pilgrims.[84]

In March 2004, ostensibly in response to punitive measures taken against the Sadr movement by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), Jaysh al-Mahdi fighters launched

[82] Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs,* 23.
[83] Luizard, 'The Sadrists in Iraq,' 258.
[84] Luizard, 'The Sadrists in Iraq,' 260; Cole, 'The United States'; 555-557.

uprisings in Baghdad (Sadr City), Karbala, Najaf, and Kufa, seizing effective control of the holy cities.[85] In April, Sadrist militiamen laid siege to the homes of Ayatollah Sistani and Ayatollah Ishaq al-Fayad in Najaf. Sistani was forced to call on the support of tribal fighters from the central Euphrates region, who arrived and liberated the home of the ayatollah on 14 April 2003.[86] The Sadrists appeared to have succeeded in turning coercive capital into a currency of power in the religious field. In response, the *marja'iyya* sought of reassert the primacy of normative clerical authority, and a war of words between the *marja'iyya* and the Sadrists ensued with the former denying Muqtada's religious standing and his right to issue religious rulings (*fatawa*). The Sadrist-*marja'iyya* confrontation culminated with the return of Sistani from London (where he had been receiving medical treatment) on 25 August 2004, and his procession from Basra to Najaf, 'in defense of the Holy Places,' accompanied by *marājī* and Shiʿi supporters from the south.

During this episode, Sistani was ostensibly the mediator in a political and military conflict between the Sadr movement and the occupation forces and the CPA. However, the pattern of events as described above reveal a contestation of sacred spaces, symbols and revenues from religious practices. The structuring principles of this conflict arose from the Shiʿi religious field and manifest as struggle for control of the field's material and symbolic resources. The denouement of the struggle was encapsulated by the highly symbolic surrender of the key to the Imam 'Ali shrine by Muqtada to Sistani, confirming the reassertion of Sistani's dominant position as a religious authority.

The Battle of Najaf, then, was never truly about a confrontation between the Sadrists and coalition forces (a battle the Sadrists could never hope to win militarily). The Sadr movement sought to create conditions in which coercive capital could be used to stake out positions of power in the religious field, asserting a radically subversive form of messianic religious authority as dominant over the normative clerical hierarchy. This was the most dangerous challenge the Sadr movement ever posed to the *marja'iyya*, because it involved mobilising stakes in the religious field (coercive capital) of which the *marājī* possessed very little. In fact, the *marja'iyya* was forced to resort to a combination of tribal and coalition forces to act as their coercive shield against the Sadrist insurgency. The ceasefire Sistani imposed on Muqtada and the Sadr movement had, as its central element, the demand that Jaysh al-Mahdi completely withdraw from the heart of Najaf, effectively demilitarising the

[85] Luizard, 'The Sadrists in Iraq,' 263.
[86] 'Tribal leaders help restore calm near home of top Iraqi Shiite cleric,' *AFP,* April 14, 2003. http://www.spacedaily.com/2003/030414091915.u341i6ro.html

Shiʿi religious field and the Sadr movement's threat to the *marja'iyya*. However, the coalition's overwhelming coercive capital implicitly underwrote this *modus vivendi*.

The Sadrist-*marja'iyya* conflict was an intra-religious struggle between dominant and subordinate positions in the Shiʿi religious field, characterised by Weber's distinction between prophets and priests. However, this dialect of religious struggle was also a feature of intra-Sadrist conflict too. The prophetic strategy manifests more clearly to the younger generation of Sadrist clerics who inhabit subordinate positions within the religious field; while the older generation, who possess more normative forms of the religious field's social and symbolic capitals, tilt toward reintegration into the priestly mode (the path of rejuvenation in Weber's terms). The viability of each strategy depends on broader socio-structural conditions, i.e. prophetic insurgency depends on the capacity to mobilise other stakes from outside the religious field within a religious context to overturn priestly domination (e.g. coercive capital).

This intra-Sadrist prophets versus priests dynamic was already present in the broader Sadr current prior to the 2003 invasion. Thus, as argued in the previous chapter, while both Baqir and Sadeq al-Sadr are important and revered symbols of martyrdom for all Sadrists, the former represents a priestly orientation which contrasts with the more prophetic mode of the latter. Ayatollah Kazem al-Ha'iri was implicated in the tension between these two poles. Thus, although Sadeq al-Sadr named Ha'iri among the *marājī* whom his followers could choose to emulate in the event of his death, Ha'iri himself rejected Sadeq al-Sadr's claim to religious authority and never acknowledged him as a genuine *marja'* during his lifetime.[87] Hai'iri was also an eminent figure in the broader Sadr religious current owing to his connection with Baqir al-Sadr (although based in Qom since the 1970s, Ha'iri had been amongst Baqir al-Sadr's most prominent students and studied under him at the Najafi *hawza*). Ha'iri's configuration of social and symbolic capital prefigured a priestly orientation within the religious field (like Baqir al-Sadr).

Consequently, Ha'iri's assumption of religious leadership for the Sadr trend catalysed the tension between its own prophetic and priestly poles. Ha'iri designated Muqtada his representative in Iraq on 7 April 2003, authorising him to perform functions normally reserved for a *marja'* i.e. to collect and distribute the *khums* and issue religious rulings.[88]

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[87] Rashid al-Khayoun, *al-Islam al-Siyyasi fi-l-'Iraq* (UAE: al-Mesbar, 2012), 383-384.
[88] Norman Calder, 'Khums in Imāmī Shīʿī jurisprudence, from the tenth to the sixteenth century A.D.' *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 45, no. 1 (1982): 39-47.

The benefits of this arrangement for Muqtada were significant. It granted him legitimacy as a religious figure despite his youth and lack of religious training, and it helped his efforts to consolidate de facto control over the OMS network vis-à-vis more qualified and senior clerics.[89] However, engaging in this relationship also entailed critical costs by making Muqtada's religious authority derivative of Ha'iri's, effectively reintegrating the Sadr movement into the priestly structure of authority. Muqtada's relationship with the Qom-based Ha'iri, then, was necessarily also implicated in the former's capacity to challenge the Najafi *marja'iyya* for domination of the Shiʿi religious field in Iraq. This challenge depended on a prophet claim to religious leadership, and this was diminished by participation in Ha'iri's claim to religious supremacy over the movement.

That the two struggles were bound up together can be seen in the way they unfolded in parallel. As the Sadrist uprising in Najaf culminated in the reassertion of *marja'iyya's* domination of the religious field, Ha'iri also moved at the same time to distance himself from Muqtada. In September 2004, Ha'iri announced that Muqtada no longer represented him, and issued a fatwa instructing followers of the Sadr trend to send their religious duties to Ha'iri's own representatives. Although Ha'iri's ruling was only partly implemented, it severely reduced the financial resources at Muqtada's disposal.[90] Muqtada pivoted back to prophetic-messianic claims, and this, combined with his ability to create facts on the ground in Iraq with Jaysh al-Mahdi, enabled him to largely retain control of the movement. However, splinter groups, such as Khaza'li's, maintain that Ha'iri is the true spiritual leader of the Sadr movement and the OMS network should fall under his leadership (although presumably under the de facto control of Khaza'li).[91]

### *Messianic Mobilisation and Desectorisation*

The Sadr movement's strategy of power has been described so far primarily in terms of a prophetic strategy of religious mobilisation structured by dynamics of competition within the

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[89] 'Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr,' ICG, 6. Cockbrn, 'Muqtada,' 117; 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR,' *Report no: 200243-009,* 24-25.
[90] Cole, 'The United States': 563-564. The financial implications relating to division of the *khums* by the OMS are discussed in the Khaz'ali interrogation, see 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR, 10 May, 20017,' 230.
[91] 'Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR,' *Report no: 200243-009,* 26. Khaz'ali claims during his interrogation that before his capture he had established a committee of Sadr members from Sadeq al-Sadr's time who were 'disenchanted' with Muqtada al-Sadr and worked to end his 'dictatorship' and 're-establish the right things in the Office of the Martyred al-Sadr.' According to Khaza'li this committee 'needs the backing of Ayatollah Ha'iri in order to power under the Shiri'a Law.'

Shiʿi religious field. This can now be defined more closely as a messianic mobilisation that has a structural counterpart, i.e. a process of desectorisation that resonates with the messianic mode and allows it to flourish. Muqtada's prophetic strategy post-2003 embodied this messianic religious mode. At its foundation lay an epistemological claim, a Gnosticism (or '*irfān* in the Shiʿi tradition) that privileged knowledge of metaphysical reality acquired via direct experience. Muqtada's reliance on gnostic methods sought to create a connection between himself and the Hidden Imam.[92] This connection to the Mahdi legitimised Muqtada's claims to speak truth *of the world* (the symbolic power of religious actors to evaluate the contingent-phenomenal world against absolute-metaphysical reality). At the very bottom of the Sadrist-*marja'iyya* conflict, therefore, was a struggle within, or over, gnoseology. Muqtada sought to assert the epistemological primacy of '*irfān* over the *marja'iyya's* preference for knowledge acquired via textual mediation and the ratio-legal methods of Islamic sciences (*uṣūl al-fiqh* and *ijtihād*).

A further derivation of this underlying conflict was Muqtada's continued pursuit of the hawza *nāṭiqa/ṣāmita* conflict (as it was defined by his father), which privileged social and political activism over the esoteric textualism of the Najafi hawza. This too had a messianic quality. Thus, the model of *marja'iyyat al-maydān,* as developed by Sadeq al-Sadr, contrasted the socially-detached leadership and 'abstract' religious knowledge of the mujtahids of the traditional *marja'iyya*, with the more concretised knowledge accessible through action and experience, the 'practice-based *marja'iyya*.' The latter sought to extract religious leadership from the 'Ivory tower' and locate it 'with the people.' This has always been a central part of Muqtada's personal appeal. Thus, he is known for speaking Arabic in the Iraqi dialect, the language of the street, as opposed to the highly formal Qur'anic Arabic typical of the clergy. Muqtada will also cause astonished joy in his followers by taking a taxi to a meeting with religious counterparts such as Sistani (songs were later recorded by Muqtada's followers to commemorate this event).[93] This practice of bringing the sacred into the everyday is the means by which the prophet makes himself the focal point of messianic mobilisation, allowing his followers to participate in the sacred via proximity, sometimes literally physical contact, with the conduit to the divine.

The centrality of a mystical Mahdism to the Sadr movement came to the surface immediately after 2003 with the emergence of Jaylsh al-Mahdi. Beyond the significance of

[92] The 12th Imam Muhammad al-Mahdi who disappeared into occultation (*ghayaba*) in 874 A.D. but is prophesised to reappear (*al-zuhur*) at the end of time.
[93] 'Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr climes into a taxi,' May 16, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJq9UkzsnLo

the militia's name, Muqtada framed Jaysh al-Mahdi's role as paving the way for the return of the Hidden Imam.[94] In doing so, Muqtada sought to inscribe the violence of Jaysh al-Mahdi fighters with religious meaning and legitimacy. Sadrist violence itself thus became performance of a religious ritual. This decentring of the clerical class in the performance of religious practice is a concrete example of the messianic challenge to clerical hegemony over symbolic capital, and to the boundaries of the religious field. (Sadeq al-Sadr's empowering of tribal elders to perform religious rituals exemplified the same dynamic in a different context.) The Mahdi was also a prominent feature in Muqtada's religious sermons and discourse in the early post-2003 years.[95]

For many, the messianism of the Sadr movement is understood in highly normative terms, it signifies the movement's lack of sophistication and religious credibility, or, through a more psychological lens, as reflecting an irrationalism or other mental deficiencies on Muqtada's part. Amatzia Baram, for example, writes that 'Muqtada himself is obsessed by the vision of the Return (*al-raj'ah*, or the Appearance, *al-zuhur*) of the Hidden Imam,' and lists various instances when Muqtada supposedly embarrassed himself with absurd allusions to the Mahdi.[96] However, the privileging of one mode of gnoseology over another is a function of field struggle, it does not relate to a principle located outside of, or transcending, the religious field. The messianism of the Sadr movement is, from the point of view of the field, an entirely rational strategy. In fact, the messianic/prophetic and priestly modes are dialectically related, coeval creations, the one prefigures the other. Both are built into the dialectical structure of gnoseology which functions as the central object of struggle in the religious field.

While messianism is anchored in this dynamic of intra-field religious struggle, the way in which it seeks to blur the boundaries of religious authority, and the structural differentiation of social reality, means that it resonates with deeper socio-structural conditions, namely, processes of desectorisation. Thus, desectorisation intersects with this intra-religious struggle in a transformative way. In this case, the collapse of the Baʿthist regime in 2003 produced an acute, systemic social crisis in which social stakes could be mobilised and brought into the religious field, and religious stakes could escape it. It was this socio-structural condition that allowed Sadrist messianism to flourish. There is, therefore, a structural resonance between the way messianic religious movements seek to collapse the

[94] Baram, 'Sadr the Father,' 152.
[95] Baram, 'Sadr the Father,' 152-153.
[96] Baram, 'Sadr the Father,' 152-153.

metaphysical and eschatological into the profane and mundane world, to immanentise religious authority in broader domains of social reality, and the structural erasure of differentiated sectoral logics and the mobility of stakes that occurs during acute, systemic social crises. This desectorisation is the most deep-seated structural explanation for the Sadr movement's particular strategy of messianic mobilisation.

### *The Political Field: The Sadr Movement and Professional Politics*

Following the Sadr movement's withdrawal from Najaf and subordination to Sistani's religious authority, the strategy to hegemonize the Shiʿi religious field had reached its limits. At the same time, a distinct political field was taking shape under the joint auspices of the occupation authorities and the *marja'iyya*.[97] This field was gradually acquiring its own institutions, political parties, norms of practice, a professional political class and, ultimately, more defined boundaries and distinct modes of authority and legitimation. Muqtada and the Sadrists were under intense pressure to join this political process. Thus, in 2005, the Sadr movement participated in two sets of nationwide elections, first to create a political body entrusted to draft a new constitution, and then to elect members for a new parliament.[98]

Engaging in formal politics implicated the Sadr movement in what was a consolidating field of political struggle. Participation in this emerging field effectively defused the most radical dimension of the Sadrist challenge to the *marja'iyya*. Rather than seeking to collapse politics into religion, and to politicise the social dynamics of the religious field, henceforth, the Sadr movement would be entangled in new modes of social practices that worked, ultimately, towards a structural separation of political and religious power. This relative autonomisation of religion and politics, and the creation of new political modes of authority and legitimation via participation in formal politics, led Laurence Louër to associate political professionalisation with secularisation and a greater contestation of clerical hegemony as a general feature of the experience of Islamist groups engaged in professional politics.[99]

[97] The central role of Sistani in midwifing the post-2003 political order in Iraq has been explored by Ali Allawi, see Allawi, *The Occupation,* 230-232.
[98] ICG, 'Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr,' 12-16.
[99] Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (London: Hurst & Co., 2008), 265.

However, in this case, Sadrist messianism did not simply give way to professional politics. Rather, the two aspects of the movement came to exist in an unresolved tension. A Sadrist political stratum and party emerged, and the movement sought to build political power via formal political channels and methods. However, Muqtada's authority remained fundamentally metaphysical and anchored in the religious field. The movement's popular bases were thus mobilised – for elections or protests – along messianic lines, i.e. not around the forms of programmatic political ideology associated with professional politics. This reflects the fact that political parties themselves are at the mass production end of the ideological process.[100] Thus, a messianic movement that suddenly engages in the political field will not thereby acquire ideological resources that are the products of social practices located elsewhere (e.g. the intellectual field).

The effects of this tension were to distort the Sadrist experience of political professionalisation away from the pattern Louër's analysis expects. Thus, despite acquiring the trappings of professional politics, Sadrist political engagement did not result in the creation of programmatic ideology, party-political structures of decision making or hierarchic integration, nor new party-political modes of authority and legitimation distinct from its religious counterpart, (unlike the experience of the Da'aw Party, for example).[101] Rather, the professional political activists of the Sadr movement remained under close clerical control and supervision via the *al-hay'a al-siyyāsiyya* within Muqtada's Private Office in Najaf. Their job was to act in accordance with the decisions taken by Muqtada and the cleric-controlled committee, not to develop their own autonomous party-political structures, programmes, discourses and ideological frameworks. As a result, the Sadrists' political turn did not radically challenge clerical hegemony over the movement, nor diversify its forms of authority, legitimacy or the marketplace for symbolic capital. It did, however, create incentives for the movement to develop these resources by building up its cultural and intellectual capacities.

The phenomenon of Sadrist engagement in Iraq's democratic political structures raises important questions for theories of ideological transformation in Islamist movements. The dominant paradigm that envisages 'moderation' as flowing from mechanisms of adaptation

[100] Michaelle L. Browers, *Political Ideology in the Arab World: Accommodation and Transformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 9.
[101] Harling has also focused on this disjuncture between religious 'millenarianism' and professional politics. Harling, *'The Sadrist Trend,'* 281.

and 'learning,' in response to political inclusion seems not to apply in this case.[102] Sadrist violence did not diminish as a result of the movement's engagement in democratic politics, rather, it intensified in certain contexts even as it diminished as a dimension of the movement's struggles in the religious field. Matthew Godwin has also noticed this disjuncture between theory and practice. However, Godwin attributes the 'failure' of the Sadr movement to moderate to general conditions of instability (the civil war) which continued to incentivise violence over the potential gains of politics.[103] This explanation seems to implicitly recapitulate the underlying theoretical proposition that political inclusion leads to moderation (given the right external conditions). It also struggles to account for how Sadrist violence continued, and how it expanded to new targets, following the US troop surge in 2007 and abatement of the civil war.[104]

By contrast, here it is argued that Sadrist political engagement *ipso facto* exacerbated the group's violence *in particular contexts.* This was because it inserted the movement into new dynamics of competition and conflict within a political field wherein coercive violence was a central currency of power. At the same time, this transference of violence to political contexts defused the Sadr movement's coercive strategies vis-à-vis the religious field. Thus, whereas Godwin depicts unitary and homogenous shifts (radical to moderate, then a reversion to radicalism), this thesis elucidates a process of strategic diversification produced by the modulation of Sadrist practices through particular structuring contexts. Sadrist political engagement entailed an increase in Sadrist violence along certain dimensions alongside a reduction along others. This was a question of which fields functioned as the locus of Sadrist struggles, and the particular function of coercive capital within the structures of these fields.

## IV
## The Sadrists' 'Cultural Turn' from 2009 and Early Secular-Sadrist Interactions

In tracing the origins of the leftist-Sadrist alliance, the Sadr movement's strategic reorientation towards 'cultural resistance' in 2009 is the crucial pivot point. The cultural turn

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[102] Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
[103] Godwin, 'Political Inclusion': 448-456.
[104] Cochrane, 'The Fragmentation,' 23-36.

elevated emerging strata of Sadrist cultural activists within the movement. This group, owing to their distinct social backgrounds, developed political perspectives that contrasted with other sections of the movement. Thus, in contrast with the Sadrists' political turn, investment in cultural domains had a greater effect in diversifying the movement's symbolic marketplace, and thus resulted in a more radical contestation of clerical hegemony. It was also on this cultural terrain that the first interactions between the Sadr movement and Iraq's secular cultural elites took shape. These would eventually produce greater social integration between certain (cultural) strata of the Sadr movement and Iraq's secular intelligentsia. This section focuses on uncovering the origins and nature of the Sadr movement's 'cultural turn,' identifying the first building blocks for the leftist-Sadrist alliance. It examines the Sadrist Foundation (*mu'assāsat al-ṣadrayn al-shahīdayn,* the Institute of the Two Martyred Sadrs) in Baghdad as an important Sadrist cultural institution in which these antecedents can be discerned.

### *The Shift to 'Cultural Resistance'*

The Sadrists' shift from militant to 'cultural resistance,' followed a number of setbacks that left the movement politically isolated and severely weakened in the field of violence. As the civil war diminished along with the US troop surge in 2007-2008, the locus of Sadrist conflicts shifted back to the political field and an intra-Shiʿi axis. Jaysh al-Mahdi became enmeshed in battles in Baghdad and the south with government officials and security forces, many of whom were loyal to ISCI and Badr. The Maliki government and al-Daʿwa increasingly sided with the Sadr movement's rivals, moving to isolate the Sadrists politically and neuter their coercive power. In February 2008, Iraqi and coalition forces initiated a major military operation against Sadrist militia groups in Baghdad, operation Fardh al-Qanun (Imposing the Law), and on 25 February, Saulat al-Fursan (Charge of the Knights) was launched against Jaysh al-Mahdi in Basra. Military operations against Jaysh al-Mahdi and other splinter groups in al-'Amarah and Sadr City followed.[105] Throughout this period, Muqtada was shifting erratically between efforts to distance himself from, or reassert control over, the movement's rogue paramilitaries.[106]

[105] Cochrane, 'The Fragmentation,' 22.
[106] Cochrane, 'The Fragmentation,' 23-36.

During the height of the fighting in Basra in March 2008, Muqtada gave a special interview to al-Jazeera announcing a reorientation of the Sadr movement away from militancy and towards educational and cultural efforts. This cultural turn was framed by Muqtada as 'cultural resistance'. He stated: 'the Mahdi Army, the army of the Imam al-Mahdi PBUH should turn to scientific and cultural integration for a certain period of time so as to straighten and reorganise itself. This is called cultural resistance.'[107] However, this cultural turn was not primarily about re-educating Jaysh al-Mahdi. Rather, its focus was on building up the movement's cultural strata to develop its cultural and intellectual resources. It also entailed efforts to build bridges to Iraq's secular-liberal and leftist cultural elites whom the movement had previously reviled and even targeted with violence.

### *Saeb 'Abd al-Hamid and the Sadrist Foundation*

In the early post-2003 period, the Sadrist Foundation was under the direct supervision of Shaykh Akram al-Ka'bi, one of Muqtada's most trusted aides, head of the Office of the Martyr al-Sadr (OMS), and second in command of Jaysh al-Mahdi. The Foundation's activities were primarily concerned with producing propaganda and indoctrination materials in support of the movement's paramilitary wing. This included the Sadrists' paper al-Hawza (famously shut down my Paul Bremmer in 2004), and the Sadrists' radio station. [108]

In 2007, the Foundation was caught up in the power struggle within the Sadrist movement, as Akram al-Ka'bi and Qais al-Khaza'li' split from Jaysh al-Mahdi to form Harakat al-Nujaba' and 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq respectively. The Ka'bi-Khaza'li axis seized control of the Foundation and the Sadrist radio station, until Muqtada eventually sent Jaysh al-Mahdi fighters to take them back. Muqtada then appointed Shaykh Salman al-Fureiji, head of OMS in Sadr City at the time, as the Foundation's interim manager. However, the chaos engendered by the struggle over the Foundation resulted in 'an administrative vacuum and a hibernation of the Foundation's activities,' according to one senior Sadrist official at the Foundation.[109]

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[107] "Iraqi cleric Al-Sadr interviewed on "armed resistance, political process, Iran's role," *al-Jazeera TV, BBC Monitoring Middle East-Political*, March 31, 2008.
[108] "Closure of al-Sadr daily stirs protests" *al-Jazeera*, 28 May 2004. https://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2004/03/200841012217955679.html
[109] Muhammad Abu Tamhid al-Sa'idi, interview by author via electronic communication, May 4, 2019.

Saeb Mohammad ‘Abd al-Hamid,[110] who would eventually become the Foundation’s director, is an unusual figure, being an Iraqi public intellectual who converted from Sunni Islam to Shiʿism. He was born in Anbar province in 1956, and was raised in a Sunni religious family. In his youth he was influenced by Arabist currents and later by Sunni Islamist trends (particularly Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb). However, following his conversion to Twelver Shiʿism in his thirties, ‘Abd al-Hamid increasingly distanced himself from the Shiʿi Islamist movements that predominated around the time of the 1979 Iranian revolution. Today, he situates himself as an independent within a liberal-Islamic current. ‘Abd al-Hamid was partly socialised within an Iraqi intellectual field characterised by a strong secular inheritance.[111] He studied physics at the University of Baghdad in the 1970s, before moving into the field of Islamic Sciences in the 1980s. His social networks criss-cross Iraq’s secular and leftist academic circles. His own characterisation of his identity is a quintessential statement of the social and political autonomy valued by the Iraqi intellectual field: ‘I am a politically and culturally independent person. I do not belong to a political party or movement, nor do I belong to any sect or doctrine. I decided to abandon all such affiliations.’

By 2009, Muqtada had retreated into exile in the Iranian city of Qom. It was from this precarious position, in March 2009, that he approached ‘Abd al-Hamid and sought to persuade him to become the Foundation’s new permanent director. ‘Abd al-Hamid, meanwhile, was in Iran as a political refugee from the violence in Iraq, residing in Qom and working at various cultural institutions. ‘Abd al-Hamid was approached by an old friend, Shaykh Mahmud al-Jiyashi (head of Muqtada’s Private Office at this time), who spoke of ‘an overwhelming desire to save or revive the institution.’ However, initially, ‘Abd al-Hamid refused to take up the position: ‘I apologised to him and made several excuses, the clearest of which were the difficultly of my lack of [ideological] harmony with the Sadrist trend, and my refusal to be beholden to any to any political side, whoever that might be.’ While he turned down Shaykh Jiyashi’s initial proposal, ‘Abd al-Hamid was persuaded to attend Muqtada’s offices in Qom for dinner.

Upon arrival, ‘Abd al-Hamid was perturbed to discover that Muqtada was present and insisted on speaking to him: ‘This was an unpleasant surprise for me, Iraq had just emerged

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[110] Saeb ‘Abd al-Hamid, interview by the author via electronic communication, August 20, 2017, and multiple follow-up discussions.
[111] Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The politics of religious dissent in contemporary Saudi Arabia* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011) 31 & 136.

from ugly sectarian massacres and the Sadrist trend, and specifically Jaysh al-Mahdi, directly contributed to this.' Nevertheless, he was received by Muqtada in his modest rooms where Shaykh Jiyashi was present along with one of Muqtada's advisors and Dr Laqa al-Yasin, an MP in the Sadrist Ahrar bloc and the daughter of Baqir al-Sadr. Muqtada then proceeded to press his case for 'Abd al-Hamid to become director of the Sadrist Foundation. 'Abd al-Hamid responded with equal force, setting out his ideological differences with the Sadrist movement:

> I am different from you in my ideological orientations. First, you hold Sadr I and Sadr II as two sacred religious *marja*' to be imitated [*taqlīd*] and followed. Whereas I regard them as respected and wise men, symbols of modern Iraq, deserving of serious study. Second, your doctrine is an internationalist Islamist creed, looking to the concept of the unified Islamic community [umma]. Whereas I have a nationalist and humanist vision, my ideology is that of the nation – Iraq – with all its peoples and land. Third, because of your Islamic vision you do not appreciate the threat of Iran's projects inside Iraq. Whereas I think that these projects are a threat to the nation and could be more dangerous than the current US occupation. And fourth, the Sadrist Foundation bears a name that is both ideologised and politicised. Whereas, I am an academic by profession, therefore I do not find it appropriate that I be associated with a religious or political orientation.

Muqtada's response to these objections took 'Abd al-Hamid by surprise:

> He [Muqtada] spoke words that surprised me, and perhaps they also shocked those of his followers who were present. He said: 'Do you realise that since I assumed this task, I have been hoping to meet a man who would speak just as you have now spoken to me?'

It seems that what Muqtada envisioned for the Foundation was a relatively more autonomous institution, led by someone who was not directly beholden to him or the clerical leadership of the movement.

Muqtada offered to give 'Abd al-Hamid complete control of the Foundation and promised that neither he nor any of his advisors or other Sadrist leaders would interfere in his work. By recruiting 'Abd al-Hamid, Muqtada proposed to transform the Foundation into a bridge between the Sadrists and Iraq's secular cultural domains. He reportedly told 'Abd al-Hamid:

> It is no secret to you that the name of Sadrist trend is an unacceptable name from the cultural perspective, people call them barbarians and backwards, so at least if we had an institute of cultural activity, it would reflect another contrasting image, it would contribute to changing this image which aggravates me a lot. At least they will say they have people who can read and write.

The project Muqtada had in mind also reveals his interest in building up the movement's cultural capacities, to encourage the development of Sadrist intellectuals, journalists and academics who could participate in Iraq's cultural and intellectual fields and provide intellectual resources for the movement's political stratum.

‘Abd al-Hamid requested a couple of weeks to think about his decision. During this time, he visited the Sadrist Foundation and met with its staff. He recalled that he was warmly received, except by the managing director and administrative council who feared their positions were under threat. The Foundation was a spacious building with multiple wings housing about 150 employees. There were some 45 militiamen acting as the protection team guarding the two big gates to the institute (the situation in Baghdad at this time still required measures of this nature). The employees themselves were largely lay activists and intellectuals. As ‘Abd al-Hamid recalled: ‘Dozens of young members were distributed throughout the departments of the institute, but without really knowing what their tasks were. The cultural energies of university professors, writers, and journalists were scattered and lost. All, without exception, were from modest working-class backgrounds and poor, *sha’bī* neighbourhoods of Baghdad.’

Eventually, ‘Abd al-Hamid decided to take up Muqtada’s offer and became director of the Foundation. He immediately set about a fundamental reorganisation of the institute, replacing the various departments with research centres with greater administrative autonomy. The new institutional structure was made up of the following: the Centre for Qur’anic Sciences and Studies; the al-‘Ahd Centre for Literature and the Arts; the Centre for Women’s Opportunities; the Friends House for Children (Dar Sadiqi lil-Atfal) which published a monthly magazine under the title: ‘My Friend’ (Sadiqi) with a wide audience; and al-‘Ahd Newspaper, a weekly political and cultural paper. Finally, ‘Abd al-Hamid created the Iraqi Scientific Centre which took charge of publishing academic studies in different disciplines but particularly focused on the social sciences.

‘Abd al-Hamid’s task was to try and create a cultural dialogue between the Sadrist movement and wider elements of Iraqi society, particularly the intelligentsia and artistic domains. Muhammad Abu Tamhid al-Sa’di,[112] who headed the Culture Department of the Foundation before ‘Abd al-Hamid’s arrival, became a close ally for ‘Abd al-Hamid during his tenure in charge. Sa’di stated:

> We tried to resist extremism [*al-taṭaruf*] and fundamentalism [*al-ta’ṣub*], and to attract artists and writers and intellectuals from outside the Sadrist trend, to open up to others and to change the negative image of the Sadrist trend in cultural and intellectual circles.

[112] Muhammad Abu Tamhid al-Sa’idi, interview by the author conducted via electronic communication, May 4, 2019.

In this task, the project achieved some successes. For instance, the Iraqi Scientific Centre would publish some 25 scholarly works, including titles by the leftist political psychologist Faris Kamal Nadhmi and the renowned Iraqi philosopher and Marxist intellectual the late Hussam al-Alusi.

However, many of the cultural activities undertaken at the Sadrist Foundation during ‘Abd al-Hamid’s time in charge were radical and challenging from the Sadrist perspective: ‘Some of what I brought in was a shock to many of the Sadrists.’ One particularly controversial example was the establishing of a theatre group at the Foundation and an annual theatre festival which was attended by many of the prominent theatre troupes in Baghdad: ‘It was not only music that was strictly prohibited for them [the Sadrists], but also the entrance of women without hijab into the Foundation as actresses or in the audience of the plays which was a major prohibition.’ As a consequence of such endeavours, ‘Abd al-Hamid faced increasing levels of resistance from those within the Sadrist movement opposed to his leadership of the Foundation. Sa’di recalled:

> ‘Abd al-Hamid did not find active and open support from all the departmental heads at the Foundation since he did not belong to the Sadrist trend, he was independent, whereas the existing leadership of the Foundation were hard-line Sadrists and somewhat fundamentalist [*muta’ṣib*].

Thus, ‘Abd al-Hamid’s leadership of the Foundation turned the institution into a contested cultural space in which the contours of an intra-Sadrist social struggle, between advocates of two competing visions for the movement and its relationship to wider elements of Iraqi society, became visible.

Because of such endeavours, ‘Abd al-Hamid faced increasing levels of resistance from conservative elements in the Sadrist movement that opposed his leadership of the Foundation, despite Muqtada’s support and guarantees for his autonomy. He recalled a conversation between himself and Shaykh Jiyashi, in which he expressed his frustrations:

> I told the Shaykh, ‘I have come to understand that Muqtada is boxed in between his followers, and not only the elders and those close to him, but also the wider body of followers. The man [Muqtada] has a vision that he cannot implement against all this opposition.’ Shaykh Jiyashi swore that Muqtada had said the same thing, word for word, in private counsel more than once.

In ‘Abd al-Hamid’s judgement, the broader Sadrist movement was not prepared, at that time, for engagement with Iraq’s secular cultural:

> It is rare for one of the Sadrist leaders to have an open, secular [*madanī*] perspective. There is Dr Dhiaa al-Asadi, for example. However, not him, nor any of his supporters,

> could advance their vision amidst this amazing emotional momentum which dominates the followers of the Sadrist trend.

Those Sadrists resisting ‘Abd al-Hamid’s leadership avoided direct confrontation with Muqtada and instead sought to squeeze the Foundation’s financial resources. Four years after taking over the role, these pressures rendered ‘Abd al-Hamid’s continued leadership untenable and he signalled to Muqtada his intention to resign. A compromise was found whereby the Iraqi Scientific Centre was separated from the Foundation and made entirely independent under ‘Abd al-Hamid’s sole direction, albeit still funded by Muqtada.

Despite these frustrations, the Sadrist Foundation and the Iraqi Scientific Centre succeeded in generating a greater degree of social integration between the cultural strata of the Sadr movement and Iraq’s secular intelligentsia. The new cross-ideological social ties and ideological frameworks that emerged from this process came to the fore in later years and were a factor in shaping the leftist-Sadrist alliance. For example, the principal ideologue of the ICP-Sadrist alliance, the leftist academic Faris Kamal Nadhmi, revealed his engagement with a range of Sadrists through these institutions had been formative in his theorising a leftist-Sadrist alliance.

Equally significant, ‘Abd al-Hamid’s story shines a light on the emergence of an intra-Sadrist conflict implicating competing visions for the movement’s role in Iraqi society and politics. This points to a seldom-recognised diversity within the Sadr movement in terms of cultural orientations and political perspectives. Nevertheless, this diversity, and the greater intra-movement contestation of Sadrist politics it entails, also point to the underlying factors driving instability in Sadrist politics. In other words, transformations in the movement’s ideological orientation do not reflect homogenous shifts, but internally contested process of change that are localised in particular strata (i.e. the movement’s cultural and intellectual activists).

### *Sadr Movement Militancy and Politics Between 2009-2014*

It is important to emphasise that what is described above is a process of diversification in the Sadr movement’s spheres of action, movement resources and how this relates to an emergent ideological heterogeneity. The cultural turn did not, therefore, mean that Sadrist militancy simply faded away, or that its political strategies necessarily aligned with the perspectives developing within the movement’s cultural and intellectual strata. On the contrary, in both the field of violence and politics the Sadrists continued to pursue strategies

that appeared to conflict with the political postures the movement would later adopt vis-à-vis the protest movement and the civil trend from 2015. This can be seen in two examples: first, the Sadr movement's continued use of violence, particularly vis-à-vis the US military withdrawal in 2011; and second, in its alignment with other Shiʿi Islamist political and religious actors in responding to popular protests in 2011.

The US troop withdrawal from late 2011 provided powerful incentives for Shiʿi Islamist militias in the field of violence to step up their attacks on US forces and civilian personnel in order to claim the symbolic legitimacy of having forced the occupier out of Iraq. Even as US forces left, these groups continued to apply pressure on the Maliki government to minimise Iraq's diplomatic ties to the US and its military and civilian presence in Iraq. The militias also started searching for new means to legitimise their participation in the field of violence once the occupying forces had departed and thus deprived the field one of its central symbolic poles around which its practices were organised. The Sadr movement was enmeshed in these same dynamics. In fact, in June 2011, Sadrist militiamen kidnapped Randy Hulz, a US businessman, and held him for nine months.[113] Muqtada himself, when asked directly if Jaysh al-Mahdi would lay down its arms following the US withdrawal, seemed to suggest that other reasons could be found for maintaining the paramilitaries. Thus, he told an interviewer from al-Arabiya:

> Who would we use these weapons against? As long as there is occupation, we use weapons against it, but if the occupation leaves, and if the Mahdi Army is not needed for other matters, such as defending Iraq's borders and so on, we will maintain only cultural, social, and religious activities.[114]

Thus, the cultural turn did not alter the distinct incentives and orientations that attached to the Sadr movement's participation in the field of violence. Part of the explanation for this non-transferability lies not only in the distinct identities and interests each field imparted to participants, but also to the lack of social embeddedness between the field of violence and the Sadr movement's intellectual and cultural domains.

Similarly, the political field continued to impose its own powerful logic on Sadrist strategies. This was seen most clearly in the Sadrist response to major anti-government protests that broke out in 2011. The Sadrists had been engaged in its own confrontation with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and had coordinated street protests of its own against the government in early 2011. However, as protests escalated in 2011, and as they

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[113] Rayburn, *Iraq,* 202.
[114] Rayburn, *Iraq,* 204-5.

appeared to adopt a secular-nationalist symbolic and ideological frame owing to the prominent leadership role of the civil trend,[115] the Sadrists deescalated its own street politics and rallied around the Maliki government. Muqtada called for postponing protests to give the government a chance to respond to their demands.[116] Similar calls were made by Ayatollah ʻAli al-Sistani and senior Shiʿi religious figures in Qom.[117] In other words, when faced with an external threat, the Shiʿi Islamist camp reconsolidated its collective grip on power, entrenched the sect-based logic of power at the heart of the political system and turned its coercive instruments on the protesters. Altering these intra-elite dynamics would be a crucial factor allowing for the leftist-Sadrist alliance.

## V
## Conclusion

This chapter focused on the strategies of the Sadr movement between 2003 and 2014. It set out a conceptual picture of the Sadrists as a social movement composed of various institutional and organisational structures and multiple, competing forms of social capitals that structured authority and relations of power between movement actors. This conceptual model sees a fragmented leadership composed of different strata characterised by different degrees of social embeddedness in local contexts, but only weakly-integrated by horizontal social linkages. This structure meant that Muqtada's role as the symbolic epicentre of the movement did not manifest in a high degree of central organisational control or strategic direction of the movement from the top-down. Rather, his leadership function consisted in forms of inter-and intra-factional mediation and brokerage. Deeper Sadrist engagement in increasingly sectorised fields of practice (intellectual, political) further proliferated this diversity in interests, identities and political perspectives within the movement.

These endogenous movement structures and processes intersected and interacted with a rapidly transforming social landscape to produce particular strategic practices. The social crisis of the invasion produced a desectorisation of Iraqi social reality. This condition imposed certain social logics of its own. This chapter argued that the Sadrists' early

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[115] The civil trend and new forms of popular politics in Iraq are discussed in chapter four.
[116] 'Sistani and al-Sadr call for postponing "Day of Rage" in Iraq,' *BBC Arabic,* February 24, 2011.
[117] Faris Kamal Nadhmi, 'The Death of Authority in the Iraqi Collective Consciousness: Analysis of the events of 25 February 2011,' in *Sikulujiya al-Ihtijaj fi-l-ʻIraq*, trans. Benedict Robin-D'Cruz (Baghdad: Dar Sutour, 2017), 43-50.

strategy of messianic militancy emerged from the intersection of the movement's pre-war social base and resources with the particular structural conditions of desectorisation created by the invasion in 2003. The gradual sectorisation of the social landscape, particularly of religious-political boundaries, also transformed the strategies of the Sadr movement as the locus of Sadrist struggles transferred from the religious field (deescalating tensions with the *marja'iyya*) to political contexts (expanding conflicts on new fronts with Shiʿi Islamist rivals in the political field and the field of violence).

The shift to 'cultural resistance' in 2009 was the crucial pivot point in which the antecedents of the leftist-Sadrist alliance can be discerned. Sadrist investment in the movement's cultural capacities had two important effects. First, it generated new forms of social interaction between Sadrist cultural strata and Iraq's secular intelligentsia. Second, it elevated a stratum of Sadrist intellectual and cultural activists with distinct ideas about the role of the Sadr movement in Iraqi society and politics. This also opened up intra-Sadrist cleavages as more conservative elements – particularly the clerical stratum who found their hegemony over symbolic capital under threat – resisted the new forms of social capital being deployed and the new political perspectives that emerged to contest the movement's strategic politics. These dynamics, whose roots have been identified in this chapter, will be more fully explored in the rest of the thesis.

# CHAPTER FOUR
# THE RISE OF MADANI POLITICS: THE ICP AND THE CIVIL TREND (2003-2014)

## I
## Introduction

This chapter shifts focus from the Sadrists to Iraq's secular-leftist social movements. It seeks to show how their strategic politics unfolded between 2003 and 2014, with particular attention to how they interacted with the Sadr movement and broader domains of Islamist politics. This period encompasses two phases and two social movements. First, the period 2003-2008, involves the post-invasion years and leading into the civil war. At this time, secular-leftist social movement politics, embodied primarily in the Iraqi Communist Party (al-Hizb al-Shuyu'i al-'Iraqi, ICP), was under siege and struggled to emerge from the margins. The second period, 2009-2014, encompasses the aftermath of the civil war and leading into 2014's national elections. This period saw the rise of *madanī* politics in the form of a new social movement, the 'civil trend,' (*al-tayyār al-madanī*). The civil trend was a broader and more loosely organised movement. It emerged from the intellectual field, and initially sought to protect Iraq's secular cultural life. However, the movement later entered politics and contested the 2014 elections.

As this chapter deals with two distinct but deeply interrelated movements, it is structured somewhat differently from the previous chapter which focused on the Sadrists alone. It begins with an analysis of the ICP in the post-invasion years, explaining the movement's decline to the political margins and retreat back into the intellectual field. It then shifts focus to the intellectual field itself, treating this space as the social terrain of emergence for the civil trend from 2009. The civil trend, and its internal struggles, particularly over its politicisation, then take centre stage. This involves an account of how the movement, under the strategic guidance of the ICP, eventually contested the 2014 elections as a united secularist political coalition, the Civil Democratic Alliance (al-Tahaluf al-Madani al-Dimuqraṭi, CDA).

The strategic politics of Iraq's secular-leftist social movements between 2003 and 2014 were characterised by consistent antagonism towards the rising power of Islamist groups in state and society. Perhaps no Shiʿi Islamist group was more feared and reviled by the secular intelligentsia than the Sadrists. Indeed, the ICP, in conjunction with other secular-liberal forces, initially attempted to secure the marginalisation of the Sadr movement from the political process.[1] The mainstream of the civil trend reflected this orientation, seeking to advance a strictly secular, even anti-Islamist vision in its politics. However, a transgressive strain emerged within the intellectual field and offered a distinct strategic vision that called for convergence and cooperation with the Sadr movement. The social roots of this transgressive strain intersect with the Sadr movement's 'cultural turn' in 2009, explored in the previous chapter. Thus, this chapter ends by presenting the first intellectual moves towards the leftist-Sadrist alliance and their underlying social processes embodied in the life and work of the leftist academic Faris Kamal Nadhmi and his engagement with Sadrist cultural and intellectual strata from 2009.

## II
## The ICP as a Social Movement in Post-Invasion Iraq (2003-2009)

The ICP and the Sadr movement emerged on opposing sides of the struggle for power in post-invasion Iraq. The ICP took a seat on the US-sponsored Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), which functioned between July 13, 2003 and June 1, 2004.[2] The movement, and the secular intelligentsia that it mainly represented, hoped and expected to play a central role in shaping the future of Iraqi politics. The Sadr movement, by contrast, was excluded from the ICG, partly at the behest of the ICP and other secular-liberal forces.[3] Nevertheless, by the time of the national elections in 2005, it was clear where political power truly lay. The ICP and secular intelligentsia were stunned by election results which not only handed political power decisively to the Shiʿi Islamist forces (including the Sadr movement), but also revealed that popular support for the once powerful ICP was practically non-existent.[4] Thus,

[1] Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War Losing the Peace* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 167.
[2] Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 301-303; L. Paul Bremer, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2006), 695; Allawi, *The Occupation,* 163-167.
[3] Allawi, *the Occupation,* 167.
[4] Jassim al-Helfi, interview by author, Erbil, Iraq, 6 August, 2017.

between 2003-2009 the ICP rapidly declined to the political margins, retreating into the intellectual field and cultural activity.

Accounting for the ICP's weakness in post-invasion Iraq is the subject of the concluding section of Tareq Y. Ismael's study of the movement from its inception into the post-invasion years.[5] According to Ismael, the ICP's fate was determined by its transformation into an 'opportunistic' actor that abandoned its core ideological principles in pursuit of political power.[6] He homes in on the ICP's decision to join the IGC, which, he argues, most Iraqis regarded as 'collaborators' and 'puppets' of the US-led occupation forces,[7] and thereby lent its support, tacitly and explicitly, to the occupation. This strategic decision, in Ismael's analysis, explains the alienation of the ICP from the Iraqi public and particularly the working classes, making the movement politically 'irrelevant.'[8] As Ismael writes: '…the claim that the [ICP] had ultimately compromised and sacrificed its entire communist legacy for a position of (negligible) authority bears considerable weight.'[9]

Ismael also asserts the importance of a splinter group from the ICP (the 'ICP-Central Leadership') which he portrays as more authentically Marxist and anti-imperialist in orientation and, consequently, as more connected to the Iraqi public.[10] Thus, Ismael concludes his study by highlighting the ICP-Central Leadership and its role in coordinating political action against the US occupation, stating that the ICP-CL was 'forging a new pathway through the minefield of Iraqi politics.'[11] In other words, for Ismael, writing in 2008, it was the ICP-CL that emerged after the invasion as the more important group, while the ICP-Central Committee declined into obscurity.

This account possibly overstates the importance of the ICP-Central Leadership. Its most prominent leader, Aziz al-Hajj, who led the breakaway from the ICP in 1967, later moved away from his radical politics following a stint in prison, and eventually became an Iraqi

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[5] The dispute between Ismael and Franzén is of little relevance here, since it revolves primarily around historical details of the ICP's pre-2003 history. See Tareq Y. Ismael, 'Review of *Red Star Over Iraq*: *Iraqi Communism before Saddam by Johan Franzén*,' *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 4 (November 2012): 841-846; Johan Franzén, 'A Response to Tareq Ismael's Review of Red Star Over Iraq: Iraqi Communism before Saddam*,' International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 45, no. 2 (May 2013), 414-416.

[5] Ismael, *The Rise.*

[6]Ismael, *The Rise,* 311.

[7] Ismael, *The Rise,* 302.

[8] Ismael, *The Rise,* 309.

[9] Ismael, *The Rise*, 309.

[10] Ismael, *The Rise*, 320-321.

[11] Ismael, *The Rise,* 321.

representative to UNESCO during the Baʿthist period.[12] Meanwhile, there is little evidence that post-2003 the ICP-CL was a significant political actor, as opposed to a small group of disgruntled communist intellectuals (such as Ibrahim 'Allawi, 'Alaa' al-Laami, 'Abd al-Amir al-Rukabi, and Ahmed al-Basri). This group published a newspaper in Baghdad (Ittihad al-Sha'b) for a brief period post-2003, before effectively disappearing from the political scene. In fact, on 21 April 2007, Ahmad al-Basri, writing in al-Badil al-'Iraqi, announced that: 'the Central Leadership of the Iraqi Communist Party has decided to dissolve all its organisations and end publication of its newspaper.'[13] The ICP-CL never emerged as an important political force or organisational rival to the ICP post-2003, and does not figure in the return of the Party to the centre stage of Iraqi politics from 2009.

Moreover, by placing the blame for the ICP's political decline squarely at the ICP's own door, i.e. as hinging on the Party's strategic decisions, Ismael diverts attention away from other important factors that were shaping political dynamics in post-invasion Iraq. These conditions included a systemic social crisis engendered by the invasion itself, which created a new logic of power within which the ICP was poorly equipped to compete, particularly given the weakness of its social and organisational base inside Iraq.[14] Moreover, profound transformations that occurred in Iraqi society during the last decade of the Baʿthist regime were equally important. These were discussed in chapter two, and include the effects of the regime's so-called 'neo-tribal policies'[15] and the 'Faith Campaign,'[16] as well as economic sanctions. The outcome was the material decline of the secular intelligentsia and the diminishing value of its symbolic capital. Iraqi society had already moved definitively away from the secularist politics of the ICP prior to the invasion in 2003.

Given these broader circumstances, the analysis presented here is less as a critique on the ICP's moral and political failures, and more an attempt to understand how a political movement, with limited resources, sought to adapt to extremely challenging and complex social and political conditions. To do so, this section applies the framework developed in the

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[12] 'Awraq fi-l-Sira al-thatiya: Aziz al-Haj,' *al-Hiwar al-Mutamadan,* February 26, 2012. http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=296344&r=0

[13] Statement of ICP-CL, April 6, 2007. http://articles.abolkhaseb.net/ar_articles_2007/0407/mordi_240407.htm?fbclid=IwAR2PGpqpzMRZCPGdykb5Z8f9KfXV8gWfhoCSj1KdDMKCTGiVN-wk7jfTrRw

[14] Excluding the KRG.

[15] Amatzia Baram, 'Neo-Tribalism in Iraq: Saddam Hussein's Tribal Policies 1991-96,' *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 29, no. 1 (February 1997): 1-31.

[16] Amatzia Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam, 1968-2003* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014); Joseph Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein's* Baʿth *party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 259-268.

previous chapter, analysing the ICP as a movement composed of organisational structures and resources (forms of social capital), and their interaction with particular structural contexts through which its strategies were modulated.

## The ICP in Post-Invasion Iraq

By 2003, the ICP's social base had been completely decimated inside Arab-Iraq. The Party was primarily represented in the diaspora in Europe and, after 1991, in Kurdistan where it participated in the Kurdistan Front.[17] The ICP also had a small armed force of 'partisans' operating in the Kurdish region. A small group of ICP activists and partisans infiltrated down from Kurdistan prior to the invasion on 19 March 2003, and were active in Baghdad as early as 9-10 March 2003.[18] As the Baʿthist regime collapsed, this group reconnected with the limited communist networks that had survived inside Iraq throughout the Baʿthist period. This included such prominent figures as Shamiran Marokel, who became head of the Iraqi Women's League. This small group represented the sum total of the organised ICP inside Arab-Iraq at the time of the regime's collapse.[19]

In this critical period, Baghdad witnessed chaotic, unorganised and opportunistic looting and violence. However, many political groups and movements were also operating strategically amidst this chaos, using their coercive capabilities to seize control of important resources, including arms and munitions, intelligence, media technologies and real estate. These resources would enable these groups to position themselves for the coming battles over Iraq's post-2003 future.[20] Thus, just as the Sadr movement was reactivating the Office of the Martyr al-Sadr (OMS) network and seizing control of mosques, other vital institutions and real estate in Baghdad, Najaf, Karbala and other parts of the south, so too the ICP was seeking to stake out its position.

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[17] Ismael, *The Rise,* 268-269.
[18] These were: Jassim al-Hilfi (Central Committee (CC)); Ali Mehdi (CC); Faris Karim (CC); Bassam Muhi (cadre); Jassim Mohammad (cadre); Ali Ibrahim (cadre); Kadhem al-Husseini (cadre); Shaker al-Dujaily (cadre). Salam 'Ali (CC) arrived May 1st. Bassam, Ali Ibrahim and Kadhim are now members of the CC. ICP Secretary General Hamid Majid Mousa arrived later for the May Day march that was the Party's first public even in Baghdad. This is based on interview and discussions by the author with Salam 'Ali ICP CC member in London, July 2019. Ismael discusses Mousa's becoming SG at the Fifth Congress and the new direction he sought to take the ICP in. See Ismael, *The Rise,* 286-287.
[19] Salam 'Ali, interview by author, UK, London, 12 July 2019.
[20] Allawi, *The Occupation,* 89-98

However, notwithstanding the ICP's small number of partisan fighters who moved south from Kurdistan, the Party would only ever be a marginal actor in the field of violence.[21] Their coercive capital was sufficient to take control of a small number of former Baʿthist offices in central Baghdad: on Andalus Square, which became the Party's new HQ; and in nearby Abu Nuwas, where publication of its paper Tariq al-Sha'b was set up. However, even holding onto these limited resources was a struggle for the Party, and one that depended primarily on its limited access to coercive capital. For instance, one senior ICP activist related a story about how the buildings the ICP seized in Abu Nuwas were powered by a neighbourhood generator which ICP partisans were forced to defend from rival groups and criminal gangs who attempted to appropriate it.[22]

*Figure 3 Iraqis reading ICP newspaper Tariq al-Sha'b which was the first paper distributed in Baghdad after 9 April 2003. The main title (in red) at top of first page: 'Our people look forward to a unified and independent federal democratic Iraq.' Image provided to the author by ICP Central Committee member Salam Ali.*

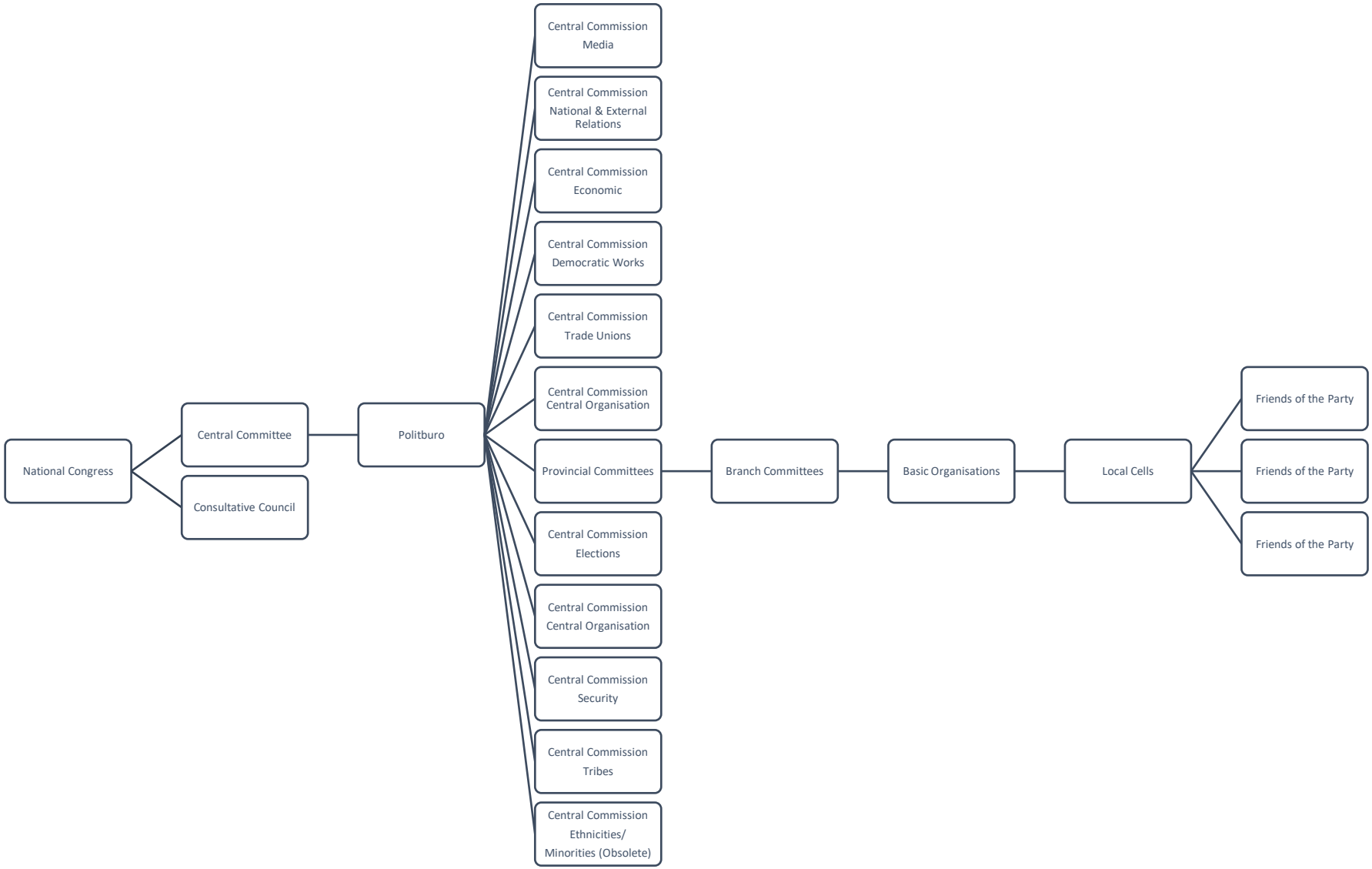
From these modest foundations, the ICP and its small number of activists began the work of building a new movement infrastructure, essentially from scratch, inside Arab-Iraq. Having established itself in Baghdad, the Party quickly set about expanding its reach into provinces in central and southern Iraq where the ICP had traditionally been strong and

[21] According to Salam 'Ali, ICP-CC member, the number of partisans who accompanied the leading cadres all the way to Baghdad was small, about five. But those who went to Mosul and Kirkuk during that period, just before the fall of the regime and immediately afterwards, was bigger. Based on discussions between the author and Salam 'Ali.
[22] Salam 'Ali, interview by author, UK, London, 12 July 2019.

retained some limited and isolated cells on the ground throughout the Baʿthist period. Thus, within a month, provincial representatives and offices had been established in places such as Babil, Hillah, Nasiriyah and in Basra. From here, the Party built a highly institutionalised structure that reflected the rule-bound nature of authority in the movement (contrasting markedly with the Sadr movement, see chapter three). Figure four, below, shows the organisational structure of the ICP as it developed from 2003.[23]

[23] This organisational map is based on interviews and conversations by the author with ICP members and Central Committee members between 2015-2019.

*Figure 4 ICP organisational structure as it developed post-2003*



The main institutional features of this structure and their functions were as follows:

The National Congress (NC) remained the most important 'democratic' element of the Party. The NC would meet every four years and consisted of members of the Central Committee and delegates from the Provincial Committees and the Party's branches abroad. The NC allowed delegates to vote on rule changes and to elect members of the Central Committee (CC);

The Central Committee met on a quarterly basis and was the main oversight and leadership body of the Party, normally consisting in around 20 senior members elected by the NC. At the first meeting of the CC following the NC, a Secretary General for the Party (Hamid Majid Mousa in 2003) would be elected, along with a Deputy Secretary General and members of the Politburo. The Central Committee would be headed by the Party Secretary General;

The Politburo was the executive committee that sits just beneath the CC and consisted of a smaller nucleus of perhaps five to seven members who were tasked with implementation of the directives of the CC. The Politburo met more regularly, i.e. monthly or on an ad hoc basis. Since membership in the Politburo came via election from the CC, the two bodies overlapped, and the Secretary General led both the CC and the Politburo;

Central Commissions (SCs) were specialised committees set up to implement policy formulated by the Politburo as the Party expanded post-2003. The Central Commissions were where most of the party work was undertaken. For instance, the Media Central Commission dealt with the Party's two main publications: the ICP newspaper Tariq al-Sha'b and the cultural and literary magazine al-Thaqafa al-Jadida;[1]

Provincial Committees (PCs) organised Party activity outside of Baghdad and represented the Party in the provinces. Where the Party was particularly active, PCs would have their own versions of the Central Commissions that operated at the provincial level, e.g. their own media or election committees. In Baghdad, given the size of Party membership in the city, there were eventually 10 District Committees (equivalent to Provincial Committees and

[1] Other commissions: Elections Central Commission dealt with organisational and tactical aspects relating to the Party's participation in provincial and national elections. The National and External Relations oversees and manages relations between the Party and other Iraqi and non-Iraqi political groups. The Financial SC manages Party finances and revenue streams. The Democratic Works SC manages the Party's relationships and interactions with other civil society groups (student group, women's groups etc.). The Trade Unions SC manages the Party's relationships with the Iraqi trade union movement.

with their own offices). (After the ICP-Sadrist alliance was formed, a District Committee was re-established in Sadr City);

Branch Committees, Basic Organizations and Cells were the remaining institutional components of the Party that represented the bulk of the Party membership. Cells were the smallest unit in the Party, normally set up around a place of work or residence. Cells typically consisted of 12-13 people who met monthly to discuss Party politics, policy, to draw up a programme of action for their local area, and to undertake educational and ideological training from a programme set by the Central Committee.[2]

Each Cell nominated a Secretary who represented the cell in the Basic Organisation. Basic Organisations supervised the cells and made sure they were provided with the necessary documents and that party policy was implemented. The Party Branch or Sections included the Secretaries, elected by each Basic Organisation (elections occurred every two years), and mediated between the Basic Organisations and the Provincial Committees;

'Friends of the Party' referred to those people who were thought to be positively disposed towards the Party amongst the mass organisations and from whom new recruits could be drawn.

A priority task for the Party, in the initial rebuilding effort post-2003, involved reconnecting with existing or former communist activists and cells that had survived during the Baʿthist period, or those who had left the Party and now wished to return. However, the psychology of the ICP old guard remained wedded to the clandestine practices that had been a necessity during years of state repression, particularly under the previous regime. Thus, returning members were subject to thorough screening to weed out those who had 'betrayed' the Party and 'collaborated' with the Baʿth: 'you had to be very careful, to check and double check for those who were trustworthy and reliable' as one ICP informant stated.[3] This process was facilitated by the Party's capture of intelligence archives following their seizure of Baʿthist offices in the days following the regime's collapse.[4]

Similarly, recruitment into the Party was still conducted according to the old, clandestine methods built around small, tight-knit cells. Potential recruits would be picked out from

[2] 'Every two or three meetings party members would have a topic to discuss, set by the central programme but they pick and choose from this according to their needs. They also send reports for party media at the provincial level.' ICP Central Committee Member (anonymous), interview by author, 2019.
[3] ICP Central Committee Member (anonymous), interview by author, 2019.
[4] The Party also kept its own records in Kurdistan based on information provided by members who remained inside Arab Iraq.

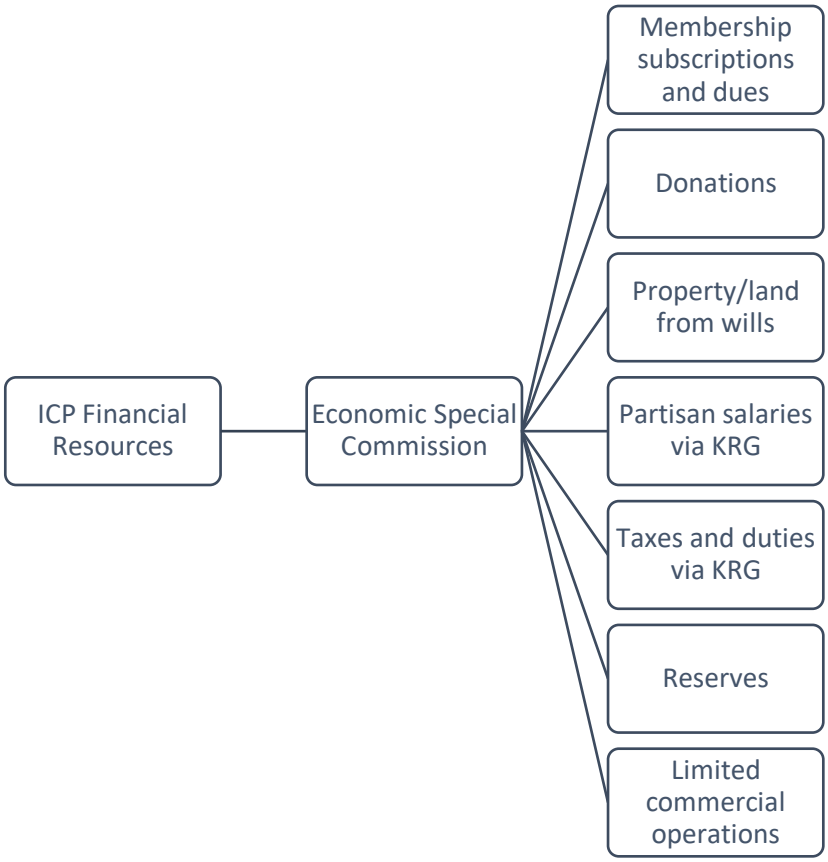
amongst those who gained prominence working in the 'mass organisations' (civil society groups, trade unions, student and women's groups etc). Cell members would monitor these activists, seek to influence and direct their ideological development and, when the cell decided the time was right, an approach for recruitment would be made. Joining the Party required nomination by an existing member. (Today, one can become a member of the ICP simply by applying through the organisation's official website, and current membership stands at 15,000).[5] None of this was designed to encourage rapid recruitment and the growth of the Party into a mass movement. As one ICP informant active in Iraq during explained:

> The old mentality did not work. This was a problem we faced when we returned after 2003. It was very difficult with the old guard who re-joined the Party, although they played a tremendous role in rebuilding the Party organisation. But they couldn't cope with the new conditions. Organisationally, their approach to Party work was in the old style.[6]

As a result, between 2003-2005 the membership of the ICP grew at a steady but limited rate, going from an initial core of just tens of activists to several hundred members.[7] This contrasts with the massive and rapid expansion of groups like the Sadr movement whose networks and institutions were more socially integrated in local communities and who recruited with little or no concern for vetting or scrutinising new members.

[5] Figures provided to author by ICP Central Committee member. ICP Central Committee Member (anonymous), interview by author, 2019.
[6] ICP activist (anonymous), discussions with the author via electronic communications, 2018.
[7] Salam 'Ali, interview by author, UK, London, 12 July 2019.

*Figure 5 ICP financial resources as they developed post-2003*




The ICP's lack of financial resources was also a limit on the Party's development post-2003 and a factor shaping its political strategies. Figure five, above, shows the range of financial resources available to the Party. Most important were membership subscriptions, i.e. a percentage of members' earnings paid to the Party in dues. These started at three percent of income for the lowest ranks, rising to 10 percent for the middle ranks, and 30 percent or more for MPs who received parliamentary salaries and other perks. Other sources of income included revenue via the KRG. Because the ICP was part of the Kurdistan Front, its partisans were encouraged to draw salaries from the KRG in the manner of the Peshmerga, and a portion of this was paid into ICP coffers. In addition, as part of the Kurdistan Front, the ICP was entitled to a small percentage of taxes and duties generated from KRG border trade.[8] The ICP also attempted to participate in the private economic sphere, but these projects were largely unsuccessful.[9] Within this overall mix, the contributions from the Party's MPs and rare ministerial appointments were particularly

[8] ICP Central Committee Member (anonymous), interview by author, 2019.
[9] ICP Central Committee Member (anonymous), interview by author, 2019.

important. This inevitably limited the Party's strategic latitude on the fundamental question of political participation.

### *The ICP's Ideological Transformations and the Intellectual Field*

The movement's organisational and financial weakness, and its lack of coercive capital, incentivised the ICP's participation in the IGC and post-2003 political process. The movement also faced distinct strategic dilemmas vis-à-vis the rise of Islamist forces in the post-invasion years. However, a less instrumental logic also shaped the ICP's strategic politics, i.e. the relationship of mutual influence between the ICP and the Iraqi intellectual field. In this way, the broader ideological milieu of the secular intelligentsia came to shape the ICP's ideological orientation. This relationship also functioned to crystallise the ideological and political divergences between the ICP and Islamists forces. The antagonism between the two movements became, in part, an extension of the conflict that emerged between the Islamist currents, and particularly the Sadr movement, and the Iraqi secular intelligentsia.

For Ismael, if staying true to its radical ideological traditions, the ICP would have allied itself with the forces rejecting the new political order. This was, in Ismael's argument, the 'nationalist anti-colonial movement with broad support,' consisting in the Sadrist Jaysh al-Mahdi, and Sunni insurgents of various types.[10] However, the ICP's decision to join the IGC was not a moment of abrupt ideological *volte face*, or abandonment of communist principles. Afterall, the Fifth Party Congress in Shaqlawa in 1993 marked the movement's shift to a liberal and social-democratic orientation, and an opening up to 'moderate' Islamic currents in the exiled opposition. Moreover, leftist-Islamist cooperation had become a prominent feature of opposition politics across the Arab world during the 1990s. In joining the post-2003 political order, the ICP was merely continuing the pattern established in the exiled opposition. What changed after 2003 was actually the re-solidification of the movement's ideological secularism and a pivot back toward greater antagonism with Islamist currents, and especially the more 'radical,' 'internal' opposition (i.e. the Sadr movement).

In Iraq, the ICP also faced a distinct set of strategic dilemmas from those that characterised dynamics of opposition politics elsewhere in the Arab world. In Iraq, the

[10] Ismael, *The Rise,* 308-309.

Islamists were not an excluded force, but the ascendant power, dominant in both state and society. From the ICP's perspective, these Islamist trends, and especially those who wielded extra-legal forms of violence, were conceived as a serious threat, not potential allies. Most threatening were the Sadrists and Sunni jihadist insurgents who sought to create social conditions in which violence and coercive capital were the preeminent resource shaping the emergent field of power. The ICP could not compete or survive under these conditions, and a shared commitment with the Sadr movement to a ubiquitous social justice and anti-imperialist rhetoric would not save them.

However, the ICP's ideological orientation was also shaped by a less strategic logic, i.e. by a more organic relationship between the Party and the intellectual field. The ICP's appeal and enthusiasm in the post-2003 phase was narrowly localised to the secular intelligentsia (who had always constituted the Party's core cadres and leadership positions).[11] One story related by an ICP activist involved in the early days of the Party's rebuilding in Baghdad, is illustrative of this dynamic:

> When I was there, sometime in the 3rd week of May [2003], there were people coming [to the new Party offices in Baghdad] all the time. Many were intellectuals, writers and poets who had links with the Party in the old days. In the 70s we had an 'Intellectuals [*muthaqafīn]* Committee,' so we called for a meeting, mainly via word of mouth, for intellectuals to come to our offices in Andalus Square. There we had a big hall and we had another room which we used for Party leadership meetings. We thought maybe twenty people would turn up, but at the time of the meeting that room was full, people were standing, so we moved to the bigger room, and that room was full too! Easily over a hundred had shown up.

Out of this meeting a core group was constituted to form an intellectuals' committee that took charge of the Party's media operations and running of Tarqi al-Sha'b.

The ideological orientation of this intelligentsia would be profoundly conditioned by the experience of civil war, sectarianism and Islamist political and cultural domination and intimidation.[12] What emerged was a focus on articulating and defending cultural life via appeals to individual civil and political rights, a secular non-discriminatory civil state and a liberal vision of the individual, and particularly the individual's creative-cultural capacities and political rationalism and autonomy, as the bedrock of a conflict-free polity. There was nothing in this ideological repertoire that speaks to a revolutionary transformation of socio-economic relations, nothing concretely, or even vaguely communist. However, as the ICP's

[11] See chapter two.
[12] Beau Beausoleil & Deema Shehabi eds. *Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here* (Oakland, PM Press, 2012).

political role diminished, and it sank back into the intellectual field, its ideological orientation came to mirror the surrounding intellectual milieu. Thus, while it is tempting to draw a causal relationship between the ICP's ideological transformations and macro-structural forces, i.e. a globally hegemonic 'neo-liberalism,'[13] the primary causal power more plausibly lies with local conditions in post-invasion Iraq.

This interweaving of the ICP and the Iraqi secular intelligentsia also brings into view a broader understanding of the movement's post-2003 political weaknesses. Thus, the radical transformations in Iraqi society, particularly during the 1990s, prefigured the marginality of the Iraqi intelligentsia and the ICP in ways that neither fully anticipated. These were the effects of the Baʿth Party's cultural policies, economic sanctions, and the so-called neo-tribal policies and Faith Campaign.[14] The notion that the ICP would have thrived if it had only made different strategic decisions vis-à-vis the US-sponsored political process, overlooks the extent to which Iraqi society had moved decisively away from the secular culture and politics of the ICP prior to the invasion.

It seems the ICP's deep involvement in Iraq's modern history, and its close relationship with the Iraqi intelligentsia, distorted expectations as to the true state of the movement's residual support on the ground. One friend of the ICP, who lived through the post-invasion years in Baghdad, told the author:

> Although the ICP was not popular like the Islamic parties it did have a long history in Iraq and no one thought it was so small until the elections [in 2005]. People at the time thought the ICP would get 15-20% of the votes in Baghdad and the South. Everyone underestimated just how irrelevant the ICP turned out to be.[15]

In the event, the ICP and its coalition of independent secularist parties achieved a staggeringly low 6,900 votes in 2005.[16] Indeed, the ICP cadres returning from exile, alongside their counterparts in the secular intelligentsia, were stunned by the Iraq they found and the extent of cultural decay, and the widespread Islamisation of social and political life. Allawi has also highlighted this disjuncture between the Iraq of the intellectuals' imagination, and the reality, noting that: 'very few analyses of Iraqi politics gave appropriate

[13] This emphasis on broad historical forces such as 'neo-liberalism,' in shaping modes of social movement politics is illustrated by Asef Bayat's analysis of the Arab Spring revolts, see Asef Bayat, *Revolutions without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 2017).
[14] See chapter two.
[15] Friend of the Party (anonymous), interview by the author via electronic communication, 2019.
[16] Jassim al-Helfi, interview by author, Erbil, Iraq, 6 August, 2017.

weight to the Islamist factor in Iraq,'[17] and had, in fact, 'disguised the emergence of a new mass political awareness and movements that were beginning to make headway amongst the Shiʿa.'[18] The Sadr movement was the most powerful exemplar of this trend.

Between 2003-2009 the ICP retreated from politics as civil war and violence tore through the country. The movement became a latent force within the intellectual field, and its ideological proclivities reflected those of the broader intelligentsia, whose priority was defending individual cultural autonomy in the face of religious violence and censorship. The Sadr movement, in particular, was perceived as an existential threat, not only to the ICP as a political movement, but to the viability of a secular cultural life in Iraq. The ICP worked immediately, albeit futilely, to try and secure the Sadr movement's political marginalization.[19] The two movements came to inhabit entirely isolated social fields, and their social stakes were non-transferable, limiting the potential for mutually intelligible interaction, let alone political cooperation. Thus, the antagonism between the two movements was not merely a function of ideological differences but was rooted more fundamentally in divergent forms of practice and contexts of social action.

## III
## The Rise of Madani Politics: The Civil Trend (2009-2014)

By 2009, following the surge in coalition forces, Iraq was emerging from the worst years of the civil war.[20] Intellectuals, artists, journalists and activists found renewed purpose in the belief that their cultural creativity might constitute an alternative, perhaps even the antidote, to the religiously-inflected sectarianism that had torn Iraqi society apart during the preceding years. Yet, translating this conviction into substantive change in Iraqi society and politics ran up against the secular intelligentsia's lack of internal organisation and political representation.

Partly an effect of occupation, civil war and exile, this lack of cohesion and political unity was also related to the decline of the ICP. This had entailed the gradual withering away of

[17] This included such important works as Hanna Batatu's *The Old Social Classes.* As Allawi writes Hanna Batatu, 'simply ignored the evolution of the Islamic movement. His book, a major reference work for the social and political history of Iraq, made no mention of the mass executions of Islamists of the 1970s.' See Allawi, *The Occupation,* 37.
[18] Allawi, *The Occupation,* 37.
[19] Allawi, *The Occupation,* 167.
[20] See chapter three.

what had previously been the intelligentsia's primary locus of social, cultural and political organisation.[21] Thus, the civil trend, when it emerged in 2009, took the form of a much more loosely organised and less-institutionalised social movement – particularly when compared with the ICP – arising from within the intellectual field, but which nevertheless sought to provide coherence, organisation and, eventually, a political framework for the marginalised secular intelligentsia. The civil trend's political turn sought to bring the intellectual field's values and ideas to bear on Iraqi politics in a way that had not hitherto occurred since the Baʿthist regime collapsed in 2003. This phenomenon is what is termed here 'the rise of *madanī* politics'.

### *Iraq's Secular Intellectual Field Post-2003*

By 2009, Iraq's already weakened secular intelligentsia had been subject to extreme pressures arising from years of occupation, civil war and the rising hegemony of Islamist currents in state and society. The secular intellectual field was, consequently, politically marginalised, socially isolated and composed of a fairly narrow and closed network of actors and institutions from journalistic, academic and artistic fields. This network engaged in highly regularised social practices structured by a shared set of norms, narratives, ideological frameworks, cultural technologies and shared institutions and social spaces. The basic features of this field are outlined below.

The Iraqi intelligentsia has been characterised by a highly textual culture mediated through a limited range of cultural technologies. These include prominent intellectual publications such as the ICP's own outlets, Tariq al-Sha'b and al-Thaqafa al-Jadida*,* which remain widely circulated, albeit within a small cultural elite (Tariq al-Sha'b printed 5,000 copies per run between 2013-2014, al-Thaqafa al-Jadida prints 2,500 copies per run and prints 6 issues per year).[22] Al-Thaqafa al-Jadida*,* particularly since the ICP opened up its editorial policy to include a broader range of cultural and political perspectives, has assumed a central place in the field. However, there are other important magazines and websites that are not connected to the ICP.[23] There are also a select number of Iraqi publishing houses which print the academic and literary output, such as the Mesopotemia

[21] Or those sections of the intelligentsia that resisted co-optation into the Baʿthist regime.
[22] ICP Central Committee Member (anonymous), interview by author, 2019.
[23] One such case is al-Hiwar al-Mutamadin (The Civil Dialogue), a website which hosts articles by many leading Iraqi intellectuals, another is al-Mada which is a secular-oriented media empire headed by former ICP leader Fakhri Karim.

publishing house and the Baghdad-based Dar Sotour. Universities and a number of think-tanks are also part of these networks, although more contested by Islamist currents and political parties.[24]

Physical spaces have been equally central to the cultural life of the intellectual field. Chief amongst these are the famous al-Mutanabbi Street and al-Qishla Gardens. Mushin al-Musawi has described Mutanbbi Street's place in Iraqi historical imagination:

> When writing or speaking of al-Mutanabbi Street, one cannot make a mere reference to a street in an urban centre, not only because it has long been recognised as the consortium par excellence for booksellers, scribes, and bookstores in Iraq, but also because of its long history. Al-Mutanabbi Street's lineage dates back to the urban district of scribes of Abbasid in Baghdad (762-1258 CE), and it challenges our knowledge of the genealogy of culture and the resilience of an industry that has been resisting destruction.[25]

In the 20th century, Mutanabbi Street re-emerged as a centre of book selling and cultural activity that reflected the prevailing political climate. In the 1950s, Marxist literature was abundant, but this would later be displaced by pan-Arabist and Baʿthist texts. Islamist and religious texts, strictly prohibited under the Baʿth regime, made an appearance post-2003. However, these remain a minority in a space that remains dominated by Iraq's secular cultural output.

The long winding street is home to more than just booksellers, however. There is also the Shahbandar Café, a site of intellectual debate and discussion, an important part of the Iraqi intelligentsia's 'salon culture'. Moreover, while the intellectual field values political autonomy, Mutanabbi Street has never been a non-political space. On the contrary, it has also historically been a site of political activism, where political parties and movements sought to distribute their pamphlets, propagate their ideologies and find new recruits to their cause. The politically sensitive nature of the street made it a target for the secret police, particularly under the Baʿthist regime.[26]

Mutanabbi Street is amongst the most powerful forms of symbolic capital at the heart of the intellectual field. Like the *marja'iyya*, but certainly less potent for most of the post-2003 period, the street stands symbolically for a source of moral authority that is supposedly located outside of the centres of political and economic power. It therefore represents the

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[24] For example, the Bayan Centre for Strategic Studies is an important policy research institute in Iraq and is connected al-Daʿwa.
[25] Muhsin al-Musawi, 'Al-Mutanabbi Street in Baghdad: When Books Take You Captive,' in *Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here,* eds. Beau Beausoleil & Deema Shehabi (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), xii.
[26] Musawi, 'Al-Mutanabbi Street,' xii.

intellectuals' claim to confer or withdraw legitimacy from the social and political order. The power of Mutanabbi Street as a source of symbolic legitimacy for the political field was seen, for example, in October 2018 when the newly-appointed Iraqi President Barham Salih used his social media accounts to publicise his walking-tour of the Street and the Sahbandar Café. This powerful and widely-shared episode of political theatre was illustrative of the success of the civil trend movement in raising the stakes of the Iraqi intelligentsia in the political field. It also contrasted with the more typical public image of senior Iraqi politicians visiting the ayatollahs in Najaf to acquire their symbolic legitimation.

*Figure 6 Newly appointed Iraqi President Barham Salih touring Mutanabbi Street October 21, 2018. Images shared publicly on Salih's social media accounts.*

As the civil trend emerged from the secular intelligentsia, Mutanabbi Street became a central symbolic stake which the movement sought to mobilise and bring to bear on Iraqi society and politics. However, the authority to speak on behalf of Mutanabbi Street is also a central aspect of intra-field struggle within the intelligentsia. Thus, the civil trend's attempts to mobilise Mutanabbi Street, both as a social movement mobilising the intelligentsia as a social stratum, and as a symbolic stake, was inevitably subject to internal contestation within the field. Some field participants sought to contest the movement's authority to speak on behalf of Mutanabbi Street, while others rejected the politicisation of Mutanabbi Street altogether, wishing to keep it autonomous from all political influences. Thus, the social dynamics surrounding Mutanabbi Street are the most visible manifestation of the struggle to define the stakes of the intellectual field, its boundaries and its relations with other social and political domains.

Close to Mutanabbi Street is another important cultural space called al-Qishla Gardens. Qishla is a former Ottoman Garrison which was renovated and reopened to the public in 2012. It is now home to art exhibitions, concerts, theatres performances, poetry readings and cultural debates. There are also other cafes and salons that remain important locales of face-to-face cultural interaction. Places like the Ridha Alwan Café in the upper-class Karada district of Baghdad regularly host lectures, book signings, and debates. Finally, but not to be underestimated in importance, is the practice of meeting in the homes of friends for dinner, and particularly to drink alcohol which is difficult to do in public. Bars are numerous in certain parts of Baghdad, but one intellectual told the author: 'the public image of consuming alcohol is not positive. That's why many of the public figures in the intellectual community prefer to drink in houses.'[27] All these locales, from Mutanabbi Street to al-Qishal Gardens, from the cafes of Karada to private dinner parties, would become sites of social interaction between the civil trend and Sadr movement from 2015, discussed in the following chapters.

These locations form an intense, intimate and cherished haven of cultural activity. During the worst violence of the civil war, and during the Islamic State insurgency, they were also highly symbolic targets for violence. On March 5, 2007, a bomb exploded in Mutanabbi Street killing 26, injuring hundreds and forcing many businesses to close. The bombing prompted a wave of cultural responses, poems, essays, paintings etc. Many of these were

[27] Baghdad-based Iraqi intellectual (anonymous), interview by the author, Erbil, Iraq, 2017.

later gathered together in a volume entitled *Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here*.[28] On 3 July 2016, Islamic State carried out coordinated bombings in Karada, killing nearly 400 and injuring hundreds more. Both attacks contributed to the sense of Iraq's secular cultural life as being under siege. This sense of defensive insularity is also reflected in the physical proximity of these sites in Baghdad, in or close to the upper-class and mixed-demographic Karada district on the Tigris peninsula. This cultural world is thus populated by a Baghdad-centric elite that are intimately related both via the written word and through routinised face-to-face interaction and socialising.

The Iraqi intelligentsia's ideological discourse has been characterised most prominently by a shared commitment to secularism. This commitment can be seen in the prevalence of three main concepts, or linguistic signifiers, around which the discourses of the intellectual field tended to coalesce: '*madanī/madaniyyūn*' (civil/secularists), '*dawla madaniyya*' (a civil state), and '*muwāṭana/dawlat muwāṭana'* (citizenship/a citizenship state). Unsurprisingly, then, the social movement that arose from within the intellectual field in 2009 came to be known as '*al-tayyar al-madanī'* (the civil trend), a new phrase in Iraqi political discourse whose emergence was coeval with the emergence the movement itself. These are also linguistically flexible terms whose meanings have been fiercely contested, not only within the Iraqi intelligentsia but also in broader Arab intellectual discourses. Consequently, they come loaded with a range of historically constituted meanings.

Each of these terms, along with '*ilmāniyya* (secularism) itself, are neologisms in Arabic. Their origin can be traced to the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798 and the connected Nahda (the Arab cultural 'Awakening') of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and are thus also bound up with the Arab world's encounter with European modernity and imperialism.[29] Early proponents of secularism in the Arab world, such as Farah Antun (1874-1922), proposed the term '*dawla madaniyya,'* as a model for the organisation of the polity that would allow for modernity to take hold in the Arab context. Thus, writing in 1908, Antun stated that 'there is no peace and progress to be found without a division of the religious authority ['sultah diniyyah'] from civil authority ['sultah madaniyyah'].'[30] Thus, this distinction was intended not only to curtail the power of the clerical class, but also as a means to

[28] Beausoleil eds, *Al-Mutanabbi Street.*
[29] Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 17-47.
[30] Mark Farha, 'Arab Secularism's Assisted Suicide: A Brief History of Arab Political Discourse on Religion and the State,' *Century Foundation*, April 25, 2019.

escaping from communalism and sectarianism as forms of social organisation that were thought to produce political conflict. Thus, *al-dawla al-madaniyya* was necessary for both cultural flourishing and political progress, now construed as the fruits of modernity.

The neologism – *madaniyya* – in the context outlined above, appears as a direct synonym for a strict secularism along the French model of laïcité (indeed the French influence through Napoleon's conquests inevitably shaped how secularism came to be understood in the Arab context). However, later reformulations (often seeking to put some distance between the concept of *al-dawla al-madaniyya* and its European-colonial origins) have often expressed a more limited definition, i.e. the 'non-discriminatory state; in other words, a state that shows neutrality and equality toward the citizen regardless of confessional affiliation.'[31] However, 'secularism' does not exhaust the meanings of '*madanī*' whose root in Arabic also relates to 'urban' or 'city,' revealing an association between secularism and the self-styled 'civilised' urban elites and intelligentsia who, in their own imagination, functioned as the avatars of modernity and progress. Moreover, *madanī* in Arabic also approximates to 'civil,' in the sense of the Latin 'civitas,' i.e. a concept of the polity as constituted by citizens. Thus, *muwāṭana* (citizenship), which primarily denotes a reciprocity and mutual recognition of rights between the individual and the state – and thus need not, strictly speaking, stake out a position on secularism – nevertheless also comes loaded with associations to political secularism.

These manipulations of linguistic ambiguities have themselves been the focus of debate in Arab and Iraqi intellectual discourses. For some, there is a recognition of the need for strategic discourse, i.e. to adapt language to make political programmes and ideas more amenable to local contexts. Thus, in this view, linguistic ambiguity can have political utility.[32] However, others see these ambiguities as providing opportunities for actors and groups who fundamentally oppose secularism to co-opt and distort the meaning of these terms. Thus, Islamist groups and Islamist reformers have frequently adopted the language of *madanī* politics, and even *al-dawla al-madaniyya,* while retaining a conception of the polity that is difficult to square with a common sense, minimalistic definition of secularism.[33] In this context, as Mark Farha has argued, the use of *madanī* vocabulary seems to function as a 'discursive diversion to ward off a more substantive inquiry into the nondiscriminatory legal

[31] Farha, 'Arab Secularism's.'
[32] This was the view of several of the ICP informants interviewed for this thesis.
[33] For example, see Tariq Ramadan, 'Not an Islamic State, but a Civil State,' *ABC Religion and Ethics*, January 30, 2012. https://www.abc.net.au/religion/not-an-islamic-state-but-a-civil-state/10100832

foundation of the state?'[34] These ambiguities played an important role in the ideological interactions of the leftist-Sadrist alliance.

The ideological proclivity for secularism, notwithstanding all the ambiguities explored above, is more than a matter of abstract commitment for participants in the intellectual field. It is, in addition, an aspect of social identity and solidarity in the face of external threats which reinforces the commitment as a fairly rigid field-wide norm. This norm has simultaneously reflected, and reproduced, a structural opposition and antagonism between the secular intellectual and religious-Islamist currents in Iraq. One field participant described this dynamic to the author:

> Our shared secularist identity makes us sympathetic to one another, it's a source of solidarity, especially in the face of a general political environment which is dominated by the Islamists.[35]

There is a structural resonance, therefore, between the social isolation and marginalization of the intelligentsia and its ideological rigidity. Another well-established Iraqi intellectual described how this structural insularity of the field shapes its ideological proclivities:

> The cultural world of the secular-leftist cultural elite is isolated, almost closed in on itself. It is not open to the rest of the intellectual trends in Iraqi life, such as the Islamists or nationalists for example. It seems the issue relates to the fixed stereotype each side holds of the other. This has created a gap between the two. The secularists look on the Islamists as fanatical, narrow-minded, uneducated, lacking the ability to analyse. At the same time, Islamists regard the secularists as atheists, uncommitted, and subordinate to foreign cultures.[36]

Thus, transgressing this ideological commitment to secularism is far more serious than a merely academic point of argument, since it touches on an essential element of the field's corporate identity and solidarity.

Finally, the structural isolation and relative autonomy of the Iraqi intellectual field also tended to reinforce a particular dominant conception of the role of the intellectual in society and politics. This conception situated the intellectual as both autonomous from political power, and also as transcending socially particular attachments. On the one hand, this notion of social transcendence reflected the exigencies imposed on the field by the civil war, a need to erect firewalls to prevent the politicisation of the social dynamics of the field by external actors. However, it also cohered with the dominant intellectual currents of the

[34] Farha, 'Arab Secularism's'
[35] Baghdad-based Iraqi intellectual (anonymous), interview by the author, Erbil, Iraq, 2017.
[36] Baghdad-based Iraqi intellectual (anonymous), interview by the author, Erbil, Iraq, 2017.

field, i.e. a view of the intellectual as the avatar of a secular modernity understood in terms of a universalising rationalism that dissolves the conflicts inherent in supposedly 'traditional' forms of social organisation and identity.

### *Ahmad 'Abd al-Hussein and the Emergence of the Civil trend*

On July 27, 2009, on a warm summer's evening in Baghdad's middle class Zuwiya district, a group of armed men walked nonchalantly into the local branch of the Rafidain National Bank. They tied up 8 guards, then executed them at point blank range with silenced guns. They left with two carloads of cash worth $4.3 million dollars. The whole incident was caught on security cameras and witnessed by locals. Both revealed that the bank robbers had still been wearing their uniforms, identifying them as bodyguards of then-Vice President 'Adil 'Abd al-Mahdi.[37] 'Abd al-Mahdi was a senior politician in the Shiʿi Islamist Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) led by 'Ammar al-Hakim. ISCI had gained control of Iraq's Ministry of Interior in 2005, proceeding to infiltrate thousands of their militiamen, members of the Badr Organisation, into the police and security forces. The brazen nature of the robbery, and the perpetrators' connections to powerful elements in the governing elite, seemed to symbolise the corruption and unaccountability of Iraq's Islamist groups.

This time, however, the Zuwiya robbery set off a chain of events that brought the dominant Islamist groups into direct confrontation with Iraq's secular intelligentsia who refused to be silenced by intimidation. Out of this confrontation the civil trend was born. The man at the heart of these controversial events was the poet and journalist Ahmad 'Abd al-Hussein. 'Abd al-Hussein would emerge from 2015 as one of the key civil trend figures to advocate for the civil trend-Sadrist convergence. In 2009, however, he played a quite different role. As a senior editor at the state-run daily al-Sabah, he published an article in response to the Zuwiya bank robbery that articulated a withering critique of the Islamists and their methods of governance. This article triggered an escalating controversy that brought the secular intelligentsia into conflict with the Islamist elites.

'Abd al-Hussein's movement between these two apparently contradictor stances vis-à-vis political Islamism in Iraq – from oppositionist to accommodationist – is prefigured in his complex social biography which reveals a persistent pattern of traversing the boundaries of

[37] Adil 'Abd al-Mahdi would become Prime Minister following Iraq's May 2018 elections.

secular-Islamist social spaces.[38] ‘Abd al-Hussein was born in 1966 into a religious in what is now Madinat al-Sadr (Sadr City), a poor slum district in east Baghdad. Sadr City was built during the ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim regime of the 1950s, named at the time as Madinat al-Thawra (Revolution City). It was the product of waves of migration caused by the socio-economic dislocations of the rural Shiʿi south throughout the early and mid-20th century.[39] It later became the site of the Shiʿi religious revival that crystallised in the Sadr II movement of the 1990s. Post-2003, Sadr City became a Sadr movement stronghold.[40] It is surely not a coincidence that the two most prominent civil trend activists who later pushed forward the civil trend-Sadrist convergence – Ahmad ‘Abd al-Hussein and the ICP’s Jassim al-Helfi – were both born and raised in Sadr City.

The young ‘Abd al-Hussein, however, was more interested in literature and poetry than Islamist activism, publishing his first collection of poems (*qasa’id*) at the age of 16 to positive critical reception. He went on to study at the Baghdad Academy of Fine Arts. However, the fallout of the Gulf War then intervened, and he became increasingly involved in Islamist opposition to the Baʿthist regime:

> In 1990, I was forced to leave Iraq, fleeing from the Saddam regime. I travelled illegally to Iran where I undertook religious studies in the *hawza* [under Ayatollah Kamal al-Haydari, a reformist cleric influenced by Baqir al-Sadr]. In truth, I was never far from Islamic studies since I have been interested in these things since my childhood and I grew up in a religious family.

During his time outside Iraq, ‘Abd al-Hussein became associated with many of the opposition groups, including Islamist factions. In Iran, he worked for the newspaper of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution [SCIRI, later renamed ISCI) under the leadership of Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim. After the founding of the Iraqi National Congress [INC], he worked for its paper that was published in Erbil. Later, in Damascus, he worked with various Islamist opposition groups opposing the Saddam regime from Syria.

However, his passion for poetry and literature meant that he never fully gave himself over to Islamist opposition politics:

> In all this work I was doing, I did not find a desire for direct political action. I did not belong to any party or organisation. I found myself more preoccupied with poetry and literary writing more than I was with politics. Maybe it was poetry that saved me from

[38] Ahmad ‘Abd al-Hussein, multiple discussions with the author via electronic communication, 2015-2019.
[39] Nicholas Krohley, *The Death of the Mehdi Army: The rise, fall, and revival of Iraq’s most powerful militia* (London: Hurst & Co., 2015), 15-26.
[40] See chapters two and three.

> becoming entangled in politics. And perhaps it was poetry that prevented me from becoming fully a part of the religious trend.

‘Abd al-Hussein elaborated further on his relationship to religion and political Islamism:

> My relationship with religion has remained ambiguous and problematic. Despite my religious upbringing, and having studied in a *hawza*, religiosity has been something limited to the spiritual and ethical aspect for me. I was not inclined to the Shiʿi version of the revolutionary religious experience immersed in political action. I found myself closer to the Sufi mystic tradition. This interest in Sufism helped me to gain more and more distance from political Islam and to find myself a secularist identity.

A subsequent period of exile in Canada propelled him further down a secularist path. After 2003, ‘Abd al-Hussein returned from Canada to Iraq, and in 2005 he took up a position as a journalist for the state-run daily, al-Sabah, eventually rising to the more senior position of editorial secretary which he held in 2009.

By the time of the Zuwiya robbery in July of that year, Iraq’s secular liberal and leftist elements had been driven to the social and political margins. It was in this context that ‘Abd al-Hussein, responding to the Zuwiya robbery, used his position at al-Sabah to publish what became the highly controversial article, entitled ‘800 Thousand Blankets.’ The article initiated a chain of events that led to an escalating confrontation between the Islamist parties and the intellectual field. When asked about the title of the article, ‘Abd al-Hussein told the author:

> The amount that was stolen [$4.3 million] could buy precisely 800 thousand blankets. I suggested that these blankets would be used to bribe voters, impoverished by the Islamist’s governance failures, and get them to re-elect the Islamist factions. At that time, the Islamist parties did not hesitate to make such bribes publicly.

In fact, the choice of blankets was an indirect reference to ISCI who had used just such a tactic during previous elections. The author’s translation of ‘Abd al-Hussein’s short op-ed provided below:

> In a strange statement, the senior security official responsible for the recent arrest of the perpetrators of the Zuwiya massacre, in which 8 innocent brave men were killed, said ‘members of a gang belonging to a major political faction committed their crime without recourse to the faction they belong to.’ This statement is curious, amazing and comical to the point of tears. We know the fear on the tongue of the Iraqi when he wants to name the faction that stands behind the hyenas. We know, that they know, that we know, major crimes occur and are covered up by the political parties. And we know, that they know, that we know, the funds stolen will transform into blankets distributed to the voters. How many blankets can you buy with 8 billion dinars? 800 thousand blankets, or one with a tiger on it at today’s market prices.[41]

[41] This is a joke about the popularity of blankets and rugs with tiger motifs in Iraq and their prohibitive prices.

> The blankets will be delivered by car, maybe the same cars that were used to commit the crime, and distributed to the destitute voters. But not one blanket will be given away until they swear by Abbas that they will vote for the political faction that had nothing to do with the gang that perpetrated these killings and stole the money and whose political faction did not authorise them to do so.
>
> The security official, with his statement, sought to exonerate this political group, but he left us confused as to why we were so sad. For the eight dead men? Because the gang belonged to a political faction? Because this gang acted without that faction's direction and did not secure their agreement to commit their crime? Or for ourselves, those who received the blankets last winter, swearing by Abbas without knowing the blood these blankets were soaked in?
>
> The most innovative campaign financing methods were thwarted by the security forces. However, the strange statement of the security official opened the door to an elaborate discussion as strange as this curious statement. For those who read it felt distressed that the gang did what it did without recourse to a political faction! The security forces need only issue a circular to the banks stipulating that armed gangs were not permitted to steal without the written agreement of the appropriate party. It is shameful that just anyone can steal from a bank without consulting the political authorities! A huge shame that cannot be covered by 800 thousand blankets, or the tiger…'[42]

This blistering critique of the Islamist elite, and its indirect but clear attack on ISCI in particular, provoked an immediate response from these groups.

'I submitted the article for publication and then went home,' 'Abd al-Hussein explained, 'I knew it would create a storm. I did not go to work for the next two days. During these two days, the paper's headquarters were overwhelmed by the volume of communications they were receiving to the editor. 'Amar al-Hakim called, 'Adil 'Abd al-Mahdi called, Hadi al-'Ameri called [all senior figures in ISCI and Badr], and others.' The article was published on 11 August, by 13 August, under intense political pressure, the board of directors for the state media organisation decided that 'Abd al-Hussein had to go and announced he had been fired. However, during the intervening time, the article had spread widely, being shared on the internet, re-printed in several papers, and discussed on several Iraqi and Arab satellite channels. Consequently, the firing was met with a spontaneous outpouring of solidarity with the journalist, such that the board of directors cancelled its decision, merely hours after it was issued.

On the following Friday, Shaykh Jalal al-Din Ali al-Saghir, a senior religious and political figure in ISCI, threw more petrol on the flames by denouncing 'Abd al-Hussein in his *khuṭbat al-juma'* and making threats against him. He stated that 'Abd al-Hussein was '*bila-aṣil wala-faṣil,'* an insult expressing that he was without a tribe and of unknown origin. In response to

[42] Ahmad 'Abd al-Hussein, *al-Sabah*, 11 August, 2009.

the threatening sermon, activists immediately called for protests in Mutanabbi Street, which duly erupted in an unprecedented display of solidarity with the embattled journalist. Police and national guard cordoned off the zone and closed all roads leading to and from Iraq's prestigious cultural site, yet thousands came out to protest. This conflagration transformed Mutanabbi Street from a space of socially isolated and politically passive cultural activity, into one of active resistance to political domination. The Islamist camp blinked first, and 'Abd al-Hussein was brought to the offices of Vice President 'Adil 'Abd al-Mahdi who apologised for the circumstances and sought to defuse the situation. An apology from Shaykh Jalal al-Din al-Saghir soon followed. 'Abd al-Hussein returned to his job at al-Sabah. However, he stated: 'I still lived in fear because I knew that these people would not forget to extract their revenge. Sure enough, two years later I was fired again because of my role in the 2011 demonstrations.'

The protests that erupted in Mutanabbi Street in 2009 gave birth to a new social movement that became known as the civil trend and which emerged from Iraq's secular intellectual field. Numerous activists and intellectuals interviewed by the author homed in on the importance of the episode. One explained:

> Indeed, the article [800 thousand blankets], and the reactions that followed it were the most important events that revealed the emergence of a secular [*madanī*] consciousness. For the first time, the relatively weak and unrecognised secular civil society stood against the authority of the men of religion who had been the symbols of the governing authority since 2003.

Mutanabbi Street itself was more than the movement's physical point of origin. It was also its symbolic epicentre, the symbolic capital sedimented in Iraqi historical imagination, that the civil trend would seek to capture, struggle to define and ultimately transmute into political power. The following observation by 'Abd al-Hussein is revealing in this regard:

> The protest was massive and surprised the governing political parties. They thought that the response of Mutanabbi Street would be merely writing and talking amongst themselves in their narrow social group.[43] But Mutanabbi Street showed it had a power and a clear voice to counteract the authorities and the symbols of religion.

The Street itself clearly had more symbolic power and social standing than any mere group of individuals. In making the Street speak for him, 'Abd al-Hussein perfectly captures the central dynamic of struggle within the intellectual field: who does Mutanabbi Street speak for; what does it say; and should it have a political function?

[43] As had been the reaction to the bombing of Mutanabbi street by Islamist insurgents in 2007.

The civil trend, when it emerged, reflected the structure of the intellectual field in its most salient features. It was defensive in orientation, attempting to secure its domains against the encroachment of political elites. It was de-politicised, i.e. it had no positive political agenda or ambition, nor any political organisation. It did not spring from, or fall under the leadership of, the ICP or any other secular political party. Its core message was cultural, a defence of free expression against religious censorship, political manipulation and intimidation. The chants and placards of the protest, and the statements made by participants, reflected this orientation. The central demand was for the upholding of constitutionally protected rights to free expression and 'not inserting Iraqi intellectuals into party-political conflicts.'[44] Other placards read: 'No to aggression against journalists and broadcasters,' and 'No to muzzling voices, journalistic freedoms are guaranteed by the constitution.' The journalist 'Amad al-Khafaji read a statement at the protest, stating:

> The participants in this demonstration affirm that we will not retreat in the face of intimidation and threats to freedom of expression which is a sacred right approved by divine laws, international conventions and the Iraqi constitution in Article 38, which guarantees freedom of expression. We call for journalists not to be dragged into political or partisan conflicts.[45]

Thus, the civil trend, in its initial phase, was oriented fundamentally towards erecting barriers against politicisation of the dynamics of the intellectual field, either by external actors or from within. Given the close interweaving of the ICP with intelligentsia, the Party was present in the background, a latent potential for politicisation. The tension between this initial cultural orientation and political autonomy and the civil trend's later political evolution would be a persistent feature of intra-movement struggle. At the heart of this contestation would be the ICP and its role in the movement as its most significant and well-organised political component.

[44] 'Iraqi journalists and intellectuals protest in Mutanabbi Street over their involvement in political conflicts,' *Al-Mustaqbal,* August 15, 2009. https://almustaqbal.com/article/360641/
[45] 'Iraqi journalists and intellectuals.' https://almustaqbal.com/article/360641/

*Figure 7 Ahmad 'Abd al-Hussein performs a poetry reading in the bombed-out Mutanabbi Street following the March 6, 2007 attack. Images provided to the author by 'Abd al-Hussein.*

### *Popular Politics and the Civil Trend's Political Turn*

Understanding the civil trend's political turn requires that the movement be situated against the backdrop of broader transformations in popular politics in Iraq that occurred in parallel with the rise of *madanī* politics from 2009. The emergence of mass protests in many parts of Iraq, most notably during episodes of unrest in 2010, 2011 and in 2012-2013, represented an opportunity for the politically minded elements of the civil trend. These elements conceived their role as providing ideological and political organisation to protests that were often spontaneous, chaotic and disorganised.

A new phase of popular politics emerged in Iraq in the summer of 2010. It began with what became known as the 'Electricity Intifada,' in June of that year. This involved a critical period of civil unrest starting in Basra, spreading to other cities such as Nasiriyah, Hillah, Karbala, Kufa, Ramadi and Kut. The 2010 protests were fairly uncoordinated and reactive, being a spontaneous and localised response to the government's failure to provide electricity as temperatures passed 50 degrees. Nevertheless, the Electricity Intifada, which emerged in the Shiʿi heartlands of Basra and the south, signalled a new phase of popular politics wherein vertical cleavages between the citizen and the governing elite came to the fore, displacing, to some extent, the previously dominant forms of horizontal sect-based conflict.[46]

By 2011, the civil trend was better prepared for a new round of protests. They were able to successfully organise large-scale demonstrations often numbering as many as 10,000 in Baghdad's Tahrir Square. This inaugurated a period of cyclical Friday protests beginning with a 'Friday of Rage' on 25 February (imitating the symbolic language of protests in Tunisia and Egypt and thus quickly dubbed the 'Iraqi Spring'). Protests spread to Basra, Kut, Suleiymaniyah in the Kurdish region, and Sunni cities Ramadi and Fallujah and a general strike took place in Mosul.[47] Many of the protests were motivated by dissatisfaction with poor services and the corruption of local officials. However, the civil trend sought to give them a more coherent ideological footprint, a secular-nationalist and cross-sectarian orientation that focused on a simple demand, 'the people want to reform the system.'[48] This demand for reform homed in on the sectarian quota system (*muḥāṣaṣa ṭā'fiyya*) as the root cause of social and political conflict, as well as corruption and mismanagement of the public resources.

However, the 2011 mobilization was met with severe state repression from the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki who had managed to reconsolidate his grip on power following hotly contested national elections in 2010.[49] Security forces opened fire on

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[46] Faris Kamal Nadhmi, 'Has the Collective Protest Begun in Iraq,' in *Sikulujiya al-Ihtijaj fi-l-'Iraq*, trans. Benedict Robin-D'Cruz (Baghdad: Dar Sutour, 2017), 25-32.
[47] Joel Rayburn, *Iraq After America: Strongmen, Sectarians, Resistance* (Stanford: Hoover Institute, 2014), 216-219; Haifa Zangana, 'Iraq,' in *Dispatches from the Arab Spring,* eds. Paul Amar and Vijay Prashad (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
[48] Jabar, 'The Iraqi Protest Movement,' 17.
[49] Emma Sky provides a fascinating behind the scenes look at the lead into, and out of, the 2010 elections from the perspective of the US occupation forces and their political role in mediating between various Iraqi political groups. See Emma Sky, *The Unravelling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq* (London: Atlantic Books, 2015), 311-342.

unarmed protesters in a number of cities, killing an estimated 30 demonstrators.[50] Large numbers of arrests were also made, particularly targeting civic groups.[51] As the protests faltered under this growing pressure, a final blow came on 8 September when Hadi al-Mahdi – a famous Iraqi playwright and prominent civil trend activist – was assassinated in his home by suspected Maliki loyalists, becoming a martyr for the protest movement.[52] This violence left the civil trend shell-shocked and in retreat.[53]

Moreover, the scale of the unrest, which involved mobilisations in Shiʿi, Sunni and Kurdish areas, precipitated a reconsolidation of the governing elite. Thus, even the Sadr movement, which had been engaged in its own confrontation with Maliki and had coordinated street protests of its own against the government in early 2011, eventually took the strategic decision to deescalate its street politics and rally around the Maliki regime. Muqtada called for postponing protests to give the government a chance to respond to their demands.[54] Similar calls were made by Ayatollah ʻAli al-Sistani and senior Shiʿi religious figures in Qom.[55] In other words, the emergent cleavages within the Shiʿi Islamist camp were suppressed as the governing elite reconsolidated its collective grip on power and turned its coercive instruments on the protesters.

Subsequent episodes of protest in 2012 and 2013 reflected a breakdown in the collusive relationship between the Sunni political elite and the Maliki regime, with the former mobilising the deep-felt resentment and marginalization of ordinary Sunnis against the government. The protests were thus focused in predominantly Sunni areas, cities in Anbar (Ramadi and Fallujah) and north-west Iraq. Their leadership was composed of a variety of Sunni political groups, Sunni tribes and Sunni insurgents.[56] The civil trend was now entirely on the periphery of the developing conflict. As the confrontation between protesters and the Maliki government escalated, the unrest took on increasingly sectarian and violent

[50] Rayburn, *Iraq After America,* 218.
[51] In February 2011, Iraqi security forces opened fired on protesters in several cities killing about thirty. See Rayburn, *Iraq After America,* 218.
[52] Zangana, ʻIraq,' 320. Civil trend activists blame Maliki for the assassination.
[53] 'Demand that Iraqi authorities investigate killings of protesters during "Friday of Rage",' *BBC Arabic,* February 25, 2011.
[54] 'Sistani and al-Sadr call for postponing "Day of Rage" in Iraq,' *BBC Arabic,* February 24, 2011.
[55] Faris Kamal Nadhmi, 'The Death of Authority in the Iraqi Collective Consciousness: Analysis of the events of 25 February 2011,' in *Sikulujiya al-Ihtijaj fi-al-ʻIraq*, trans. Benedict Robin-D'Cruz (Baghdad: Dar Sutour, 2017), 43-50.
[56] One of the best analyses of the political context surrounding these protests and the transition toward the Islamic State insurgency can be found in Kirk H. Sowell, 'Iraq's Second Sunni Insurgency,' *Hudson Institute,* August 9, 2014. https://www.hudson.org/research/10505-iraq-s-second-sunni-insurgency

dimensions.[57] At the same time, neighbouring Syria was descending into a civil war. The growth of a Sunni jihadist movement via the Syrian conflict would join up with a reinvigorated Sunni insurgency in Iraq, exploiting the opportunities provided by civil unrest to eventually metastasise into the Islamic State crisis that swept the country in 2014.[58]

This experience of violent repression and marginalization from 2011, and the reconsolidation of Shiʿi Islamist hegemony in the political field, prompted parts of the civil trend to move strategically from engagement in street protests and direct confrontation with the political elites towards a more politically oriented posture. This involved forming a political coalition that would contest the national elections in 2014. This strategy would seek to stakeout positions of influence within the political field, while avoiding the disastrous confrontations with state and non-state actors against whom the civil trend's lack of coercive capital rendered the movement terminally vulnerable.

The civil trend thus adopted a strategy of integration into the political field via an ideologically unified, secularist political platform, the Civil Democratic Alliance (al-Tahaluf al-Madani al-Dimuqraṭi, CDA). The Alliance contested the 2014 parliamentary elections on a simple but coherent secularist ideological platform advocating for a civil state. The alliance argued that his was the cure for sectarianism, corruption and governance failures attributed to the Islamist political elites. Thus, of central importance in the CDA's programme was their rejection of the sectarian quota system (*al-muḥāṣaṣa' al-ṭā'ifiyya*), by which the political parties distributed ministerial positions and senior posts in the administrative state on the basis of sectarian and party-political affiliations.[59]

This political turn inevitably empowered the ICP's role within the movement as the Party was the only significant, mass-membership political entity within the civil trend. In the end, the CDA strategy was a failure, particularly from the perspective of the ICP. In the 2014 elections, the alliance won only three seats: Alusi headed the list, followed by Faiq al-Shaykh 'Ali (the People's Party), while Shirouk al-'Abayachi took the third seat through the female quota. Faris Jajo, who obtained his seat via the quota for religious minorities, joined the CDA post-election. The ICP's main candidate, Jassim al-Helfi, came third with 17,000 votes in Baghdad, but lost his seat to 'Abayachi because of the quota system. This outcome

[57] Rayburn, *Iraq After America,* 216-219; and Zangana, *"Iraq".*
[58] Sowell, 'Iraq's Second Sunni Insurgency.'
[59] For a discussion on the functioning of the *muḥāṣaṣa ṭā'fiyya*, see Toby Dodge, 'Tracing the Rise of Sectarianism in Iraq after 2003,' memo presented at *The Comparative Politics of Sub-state Identity in the Middle East LSE MEC workshop,* June 29, 2018. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/09/13/tracing-the-rise-of-sectarianism-in-iraq-after-2003/

generated considerable animosity, particularly between the ICP, its allies and 'Abayachi. The failure of the CDA experiment exacerbated transverse cleavages within the civil trend, and particularly amongst its political coalition. These dynamics would be an important factor in the civil trend-Sadrist convergence from 2015.[60]

## IV
## Transgressing the Secular Intelligentsia: Faris Kamal Nadhmi and the Call for a Leftist-Sadrist Alliance

The mainstream of the civil trend, including the ICP, remained ideologically and programmatically united around a secularist, anti-Islamist platform all the way from 2009 up to the elections in 2014. However, a transgressive strain of thought did emerge within the Iraqi secular intelligentsia advocating for coalition politics between the civil trend and the Sadr movement. This transgressive strain can be traced back to 2010 and to the Iraqi leftist academic and social psychologist Faris Kamal Nadhmi.[61] Nadhmi's story intersects with the Sadr movement's 'cultural turn' in 2009, and the secular-Sadrist social and ideological interactions that flowed from this episode.[62]

In 2017, responding to renewed interest in his work prompted by his prominent role in the civil trend-Sadrist coalition, Nadhmi published a book through the Baghdad-based publishing house Dar Sutour entitled Siykulujiya al-Ihtijaj fil-'Iraq (The Psychology of Protest in Iraq). This book sought to trace the evolution of Iraq's protest movements. However, the centre piece of this book was an essay, now famous in Iraq, entitled 'The Sadrists and the Communists and the Choice of the Historical Bloc'.[63] This essay drew on Marxist-Gramscian theory to set out a new narrative and ideological framework that sought to explicate and justify a political alliance between the civil trend, the left and the Sadr movement. In fact, Nadhmi had originally published this article some seven years

[60] The effects of transverse cleavages in the civil trend are fully explored in chapters five and six.
[61] Faris Kamal Nadhmi, interviews by the author, Erbil, Iraq, August 7, 2017 & September 10, 2017. Supplemented with material recorded during several follow-up discussions between 2017-2019 via electronic communication.
[62] See chapter three.
[63] For translation of this article, see 'Faris Kamal Nadhmi and the 'Historical Bloc': The Theoretical Foundations of the Sadrist-Civil Trend Alliance,' trans. Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, *Iraq After Occupation,* August 24, 2016. https://www.iraqafteroccupation.com/2016/08/24/fares-kamal-nazmi-and-the-historical-bloc-the-theoretical-foundations-of-the-sadrist-civil-trend-alliance/

previously, in June 2010, in the paper al-Aalem and it thus turned out to be a remarkably prescient piece of political writing.

This line of thinking was transgressive and controversial because it cut against core tenets of the civil trend's identity, particularly those aspects most deeply rooted in the secular intellectual field: autonomy from political elites and political action; and its rigid ideological secularism and opposition to Islamism and the Islamist political forces governing Iraq (which included the Sadr movement). The idea for a leftist-Sadrist alliance thus emerged from the social margins of the secular intelligentsia. Consequently, both the idea and its author remained peripheral, even objects of derision and suspicion, within the secular intelligentsia and civil trend until after the movement's 2014 electoral failure. After this point, key figures in the ICP, most prominently Jassim al-Helfi, began to engage seriously with Nadhmi's strategic vision. In fact, during the interview the author conducted with Helfi, in Iraq in 2017, he stated that Nadhmi had 'created the intellectual atmosphere for this relationship between the ICP and the Sadr movement.'[64]

This section explores Nadhmi's ideological production and the social conditions of its emergence. Part of this story relates to Nadhmi's own background and his position of relative marginality within the secular intelligentsia. It also homes in on his engagement with Sadrist cultural institutions, particularly during the period when these were under the leadership of Saeb 'Abd al-Hamid, i.e. following the Sadr movement's cultural turn in 2009. Thus, these social interactions and the new cultural and political perspectives they generated constitute the longer-backstory to the leftist-Sadrist alliance. They demonstrate that this was far from an 'instrumental coalition' shorn of deeper social and cultural roots. Rather, the origins of the alliance point to a substrate of social interactions between the two movements on cultural terrain dating back to 2009-2010.

Faris Nadhmi was born in Baghdad in 1962 into a Sunni aristocratic family with a long history of involvement in Iraqi politics. His grandfather held numerous ministerial positions during the British mandate period. His uncle was twice a provincial governor, while his father was a judge on the People's Court (*muḥakamat al-sha'b*) that was established after the 1958 revolution. Nadhmi's father was also a member of the ICP, and in 1963, following the overthrow of 'Abd al-Karim Qasim in a Baʿthist coup, he was imprisoned and tortured by the new regime. As a child Nadhmi would visit his father in jail until his release in 1967, after

[64] Jassim al-Helfi, interview by author, Erbil, Iraq. August 6, 2017.

which his father formally left the ICP. However, he remained friendly with his former comrades and Nadhmi recalled how his early intellectual development was heavily influenced by his father's imprisonment and the intellectual and cultural life that surrounded the family home. Nadhmi's social world was thus almost entirely secular, and this was reinforced by the suppression of Islamist trends under the Baʿthist regime, when these currents were forced to operate in secret.

This changed dramatically after 2003 when the previously repressed Islamist movements became the ascendant cultural and political force. Nadhmi was working as an academic at the University of Baghdad, and he found himself teaching many students from religious trends (most Iraqi students, even those from religious backgrounds, attend universities and colleges rather than the religious hawzas or madrasas). This included many Sadrist students too, 'I could tell them from their clothes and dialects' Nadhmi explained. This was an extremely challenging time to be teaching, given the civil war that was raging in Baghdad:

> It was a difficult time for us [academics], especially around 2005-2006. We had escaped the tyranny of the Saddam regime, but a new kind of tyranny was consolidating under the Islamist parties. It was not easy to for us, as teachers, to say all that we wanted to say in the class room. Often, students with religious or Islamist orientations would challenge us, saying that what we were teaching contradicted their religious beliefs or what was said in the Qur'an.

However, Nadhmi ultimately found the pedagogical challenge of teaching in this environment extremely rewarding. With patience and caution he could come to an understanding and mutual respect with his students, even those with Islamist orientations: 'The key was to win over "the other," without losing yourself'. It is worth noting, then, that in Iraq's supposedly sect-segmented and ideologically polarised society, the country's institutions of higher education were perhaps uniquely positioned post-2003 to function as social spaces which brought a diverse range of ideological trends and social groups together.

For Nadhmi, this experience presaged his later engagement with the Sadr movement and helps explain his preparedness to experiment with cultural interactions across the secular-Islamist divide. It is also worth noting in this regard that in 2012 Nadhmi moved from Baghdad to Erbil to be closer to his Kurdish wife. Taking up a new position at the University of Sulaymaniyah extricated him from the intense and tightknit social world of the Baghdad cultural elite:

> This left a dual influence. It physically isolated me somehow, but also gave me, at the same time, a sort of distance and opportunity to deeply observe the Iraqi situation from outside and to develop my thoughts about it.

Being physically and socially more on the margins of the secular intellectual field seems to have given Nadhmi greater latitude to engage in transgressive practices, and this found expression in his more heterodox ways of thinking.

In 2009, Nadhmi began attending the Sadrist Foundation, then under the control of his friend Saeb 'Abd al-Hamid, to give talks and lectures. He found that his analysis of the Sadrists as a 'marginalised social trend, not a political Islamist group' resonated with the audience of Sadrist intellectuals, academics and journalists who worked at the Foundation. Nadhmi recalled: 'I was keen to encourage their [Sadrists] participation in cultural and academic activity… they greatly welcomed my presence, despite their knowledge that I was both a leftist and a secularist.' In 2010, the Iraqi Scientific Centre, a body set up within the Sadrist Foundation, began a project which aimed to publish 25 books within the field of social sciences, and invited well-known Iraqi academics, particularly from secular-leftist currents, to submit drafts. Nadhmi published two books through this project.

At this time, and because of his experiences at the Sadrist Foundation, Nadhmi began formulating new and controversial ideas that took shape in his remarkably prescient article calling for a Communist-Sadrist political alliance. When considered alongside another article he published around the same time, entitled, 'An analysis of the Iraqi communist personality,'[65] it is possible to see the emergence of a systematic ideological project framed in Gramscian theoretical concepts. Nadhmi also drew on cultural narratives from both Iraqi historical memory and a broader post-colonial experience, to fashion new cultural frameworks that would unsettle the rigid notion of secular-Islamist bifurcation that had come to characterise the intellectual field.

Nadhmi began by observing that, amongst the various political actors who constitute the Iraqi political landscape, it is only the ICP and the Sadrists who have the potential to constitute a new historical bloc. This is owing to the embeddedness of the two movements in Iraqi society and history, and their representation of different social formations that, when brought together, could thereby constitute a new hegemonic project. Nadhmi wrote:

> The Communists and the Sadrists (urban and rural, elites and masses) constitute, perhaps, the only two political movements that are deeply embedded in the social terrain of Arab Iraq. Both have penetrated the social life of the oppressed, in contrast to the

[65] Faris Nadhmi, 'Tahlil al-Shakhsiyya al-Shuyu'iyya al-'Iraqiyya,' *al-Hiwar al-Mutamadan,* Feburary 28, 2019.

> other political trends that emerged from the elites and are, therefore, in a sense artificial and socially disconnected. Therefore… it is the Communists and the Sadrists that are called upon to take the choice of political convergence and coordination within the project of the historical bloc.

In Gramscian theory the historical bloc is the key instrument for the unseating of one hegemony and its replacement by another. Central to its transformative power is the relationship it entails between organic intellectuals, the traditional intelligentsia and the political party. The party provides a link between certain sections of the traditional intelligentsia and the organic intellectual stratum which emerges from the productive function of the working class. This is the process by which the traditional intelligentsia come to play a role in raising and directing the consciousness of the proletariat. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Smith explain: 'It is through this assumption of conscious responsibility, aided by the absorption of ideas and personnel from the more advanced bourgeois intellectual strata, that the proletariat can escape from defensive corporatism and economism and advance towards hegemony.'[66]

In Nadhmi's Gramscian formulation the Iraqi intellectual field assumes the role of the traditional intelligentsia, being populated with professional intellectuals who highly value the appearance of transcending social location and claim to speak from a universal and socially detached position. The ICP, increasingly irrelevant as a political force, was heavily invested in these same cultural domains. The party had thus lost a political purpose, having come to embody the intellectual field and its characteristic self-image of social detachment. Nadhmi, therefore, distinguishes between the 'social' and 'political' communist, noting that the typical Iraqi communist was a part of the 'intellectual [*muthaqaf]* elite,' vocationally engaged as 'artists, in literature, journalism, and in academics,' and primarily seeking to 'raise social and aesthetic awareness.' This did not amount to a political project rooted in the experience of the Iraqi working classes. It is worth noting here that the ICP figure who most enthusiastically embraced Nadhmi's approach and drove forward the ICP-Sadrist alliance at a political level was Jassim al-Helfi a quintessential Communist political activist from working class roots, not an intellectual.

In other words, all the elements in the mechanism that would, in Gramsci's formulation, constitute a counter-hegemonic project had come unstuck and disconnected. The task, as Nadhmi saw it, was putting these parts back together, to reunite structure and

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[66] Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Smith, 'The Intellectuals,' in *Antonio Gramsci Selections from the Prison Notebook* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2003), 4.

superstructure. This would inevitably involve transcending the socio-structural secular-religious divide. Nadhmi quotes the Moroccan intellectual, the late Muhammad Abed al-Jabri, to emphasise this point:

> Any particular movement for change in current Arab society cannot, by itself, contain the causes of that change… Rather, it must emerge from the Arab reality, it must take into consideration all of its components: the contemporary and the traditional; the elites and the masses; the minorities and the majorities; the ranks of the workers; the ranks of the students; and, most importantly, the ranks of the mosques and those who pray.

Consequently, Nadhmi perceived the secular-religious divide as self-defeating. The Iraqi reality meant that the secular-Islamist dichotomy placed political rationality on one side of a socio-structural divide and the symbolic and charismatic resources required for broad social mobilisation on the other. As Nadhmi writes:

> The Sadrist movement does not currently lack popular momentum. However, what it does lack, for reasons connected to the movement's intensely populistic nature, is the organised, rational, theoretical analysis which the Communists possess. On the other hand, while the Communists possess these higher intellectual and organisational capacities, they lack a sufficient social base to transmit their ideas into reality, for reasons connected to the psychological foundation of the masses.

What Nadhmi terms the 'psychological foundation of the masses' can be recast as the mobilising charisma of the Sadrist movement represented by Muqtada's religious leadership, a structural feature of the Sadrist social base.

This charisma needs to be harnessed and redirected, not circumvented. Organisational and legitimating resources must be brought together in sufficient quantities to catalyse a movement that can move toward a new hegemony.[67] As Nadhmi writes:

> Each side needs the other. Not on the level of an artificial and unrealistic merging of the two, but with the intention of consultation, coordination, cooperation, an exchange of expertise in political planning for protest and reform…irrespective of their ideological divergence, the Communists stand to lose ground if they persist in distancing themselves from the flame of Sadrist populism. While the Sadrists face an incremental defeat if they continue to reject Communist rationality.

His argument, therefore, homes in on a political strategy that would combine the technical and organisational capacities of the ICP, and its rational-ideological resources, with the legitimating resources and mobilising capacities of the Sadr movement. The aim was to shape the political consciousness of an emerging Sadrist organic intellectual stratum and to politically direct its 'mass element,' in Gramsci's terms, i.e. the 'ordinary, average men,

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[67] Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The politics of religious dissent in contemporary Saudi Arabia* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011), 30.

whose participation [in the party] takes the form of discipline and loyalty, rather than any creative spirit or organisational ability.' The Sadrists' huge social base was a force to be reckoned with, but it had to be made cohesive and properly directed else they would 'scatter into impotent diaspora and vanish into nothing.'[68]

Nadhmi knew that his proposed project would be highly controversial within secular-leftist and liberal circles. Not only did it propose seeking an alliance with an Islamist force that most considered an ideological enemy and a physical threat, it also tore up the notion of the intelligentsia's political and social autonomy. It ascribed the intellectual an explicitly political role alongside the party and political elites. Nadhmi wrote in concluding the 2010 article:

> This call, [for a leftist-Sadrist convergence] at first glance might be described as fanciful or utopian. However, general historical experience, and the particularities of the Iraqi situation, all indicate that only creative political solutions can recover and rebuild societies mired in crises. Does saving Iraq not deserve a brave radical approach of this type? It is incumbent on the social base and leadership of the Communists and Sadrists, the intellectual elites and influential personalities, to take the initiative, devising this political practice that can deliver reform and hope.

Nevertheless, Nadhmi's told the author that, in 2010, the initial response to his article from the civil trend and ICP activists was minimal and uniformly critical.[69] He recalled that many leftists and communists questioned his intentions: 'They claimed I was a Sadrist agent or, at best, a naïve person who did not understand politics.' Thus, his engagement with the Sadrist movement from 2009 was a transgressive practice that entailed a reputational cost to his standing in the intellectual field.

By contrast, the interest in Nadhmi's work from Sadrist youth and cultural activists and intellectuals was more positive. He acquired new social relationships and forms of symbolic capital that elevated his standing vis-à-vis elements of the Sadr movement. This unusual configuration of social capital would make Nadhmi an important actor in later years when the leftist-Sadrist coalition became a viable political strategy. By 2015, Nadhmi's 2010 article and its central ideas would become a key ideological component of the civil trend-Sadrist convergence, frequently referenced by those seeking to turn his 'utopian' project into a concrete political strategy.

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[68] Gramsci, *Selections,* 152.
[69] For example, see Sadeq al-Ta'iy, "'al-Kutla al-Ta'rikhiyya' fi-l-'Iraq…Tafkiyk al-Muqarabat," *al-Quds al-Arabi,* March 16, 2016, http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=509529.

# V
# Conclusion

This chapter has dealt primarily with two distinct but overlapping social movements, the ICP and the civil trend. It has explained the decline to the political margins of the ICP in the post-invasion years and the eventual rise of *madanī* politics in the form of the more loosely organised civil trend following the civil war. The emergence of new forms of popular politics in Iraq from 2010 – principally the Electricity Intifada in Basra in 2010 and the 'Iraqi Spring,' in 2011 – provided an opportunity for the civil elites to fashion a new political role for themselves. Initially, this role involved claiming leadership of the protest movement. However, it later expanded through the creation of the CDA as the electoral vehicle for the protests. Up until the disappointing national elections in 2014, the civil trend and the ICP both remained committed to forwarding a united secular *madanī* political and ideological project. However, the failure of the CDA project, and particularly its inability to provide parliamentary seats for the ICP, led to intra-movement conflicts and prompted some figures in the ICP to reassess the viability of the civil trend as a political framework.

However, in the background of these political developments, a transgressive strain of thought was developing within the intellectual field from 2010. This was rooted in social interactions occurring between the secular intelligentsia and the Sadr movement on cultural terrain. These interactions occurred primarily within a social space opened up by the Sadr movement's 'cultural turn,' discussed in chapter three. The outcome of these processes was a greater degree of social embeddedness between the Sadr movement and the Iraqi intelligentsia. This manifest in new cross-ideological social ties and ideological frameworks that would also play an important role in the convergence of the civil trend and Sadr movement from 2015.

# CHAPTER FIVE
# THE REFORM PROTEST MOVEMENT & THE CIVIL TREND-SADRIST CONVERGENCE (2015-2018)

> This historical bloc [between the civil and Sadrist trends] is not an intellectual fantasy or a political utopia, but has become a latent possibility awaiting activation to be realised, especially in light of the civil-religious (Sadrist) convergence which was really achieved through the protest movement. This could be the constructive nucleus for the bloc.
>
> – Dhia al-Asadi, head of Sadrist political bloc in the Iraqi parliament speaking at Erbil International Cultural Festival 13 April 2017.

> The first step [toward alliance with the Sadr movement], and it was the most important, was the protest movement. This was the door that opened up the possibility of convergence, and we did not find another.
>
> – Jassim al-Helfi, ICP Central Committee and Politburo member. Interview by the author, Iraq, August 2017.

## I
## Introduction

The leftist-Sadrist electoral alliance (Sairoun), which won Iraq's May 2018 election, was officially formed in January 2018, only a matter of months prior to the election. However, this political alliance was only the surface layer of a much deeper set of cross-ideological interactions and negotiations. These were mediated through the social terrain of the 2015 'reform protest movement'[1] and the civil trend, turning both into highly contested domains of social struggle. This chapter deals with these aspects of the civil trend-Sadrist convergence, leaving the politics of the electoral coalition between the ICP and the Sadr movement for the following chapter.

[1] Protesters used a variety of terms including: al-ḥaraka al-iḥtijājiyya (the protest movement); al-ḥaraka al-iṣlāḥiyya (the reform movement); and al-taẓāhurāt al-iṣlāḥiyya (the reform protests). "Reform protest movement" represents an amalgam of these terms.

The protest movement that erupted in the summer of 2015 started in Basra and quickly spread to Baghdad. What began as spontaneous and localised demonstrations over poor services morphed into the largest and most significant protest movement in Iraq's post-2003 history.[2] The civil trend attempted to fashion a leadership role by acting as the mediators between protesters and the political class. The protests thus acquired a *madanī* ideological footprint, condemning the governance failures of the Islamist elites and calling for an end to the sectarian and party quota system (the *muḥāṣaṣa' tā'ifyiya wa-ḥizbiyya*) in order to break the grip of sectarianism and party factionalism on the political system and for the promotion of technocratic ministers.[3]

Islamist movements and political actors moved quickly to try and join, or exploit, this protest movement. However, among them the Sadrists proved uniquely capable of integrating with the demonstrations despite their ideological differences with the civil trend and a recent history marred by mutual distrust and antagonism. Notwithstanding the Sadrists' leading role, the social movement coalition that emerged appeared to eschew previously dominant forms of identity-based politics and to abandon Shiʿi religious symbols and ideology. Instead, the Sadrists adopted the more moderate and secular practices of their newfound leftist allies. The civil trend-Sadrist convergence in the 2015 protest movement thus functioned as the platform for the later political alignment between the Iraqi left and the Sadr movement.

This chapter explains this strategic realignment by focusing on the interactive dynamics of three dimensions of transformation. First, it unpacks the social crises which converged in 2014-2015 to reconfigure the socio-structural and institutional constraints and opportunities which parameterised actors' calculations and strategic behaviours. Second, it explores the dynamics of transverse movement cleavages and how these shifted the boundaries of strategic possibilities that manifest to movement actors. These cleavages were a function of the social crises themselves and the tactical actions of movement actors acting within these critical events. However, they also resulted from more slow-moving processes of

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[2] Faleh A. Jabar, 'The Iraqi Protest Movement: From Identity Politics to Issue Politics,' *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series*, June 22, 2018, 9. https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88294/1/Faleh_Iraqi%20Protest%20Movement_Published_English.pdf

[3] For a discussion on the functioning of the *muḥāṣaṣa ṭā'fiyya*, see Toby Dodge, 'Tracing the Rise of Sectarianism in Iraq after 2003,' memo presented at *The Comparative Politics of Sub-state Identity in the Middle East LSE MEC workshop,* June 29, 2018. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/09/13/tracing-the-rise-of-sectarianism-in-iraq-after-2003/ ; and, on its transition from a sectarian to a party-based logic, see Fanar Haddad, 'The Waning Relevance of the Sunni-Shia Divide,' *The Century Foundation,* April 10, 2019. https://tcf.org/content/report/waning-relevance-sunni-shia-divide/?agreed=1

socialisation rooted in routine social action structured by particular fields of practice. And third, the negotiation of the convergence itself, i.e. the cross-movement interactions that occurred on the social terrain of the protest movement and the civil trend and how this terrain both shaped, and was shaped by, the practices of movement actors.

## II
## Social Crises and the Strategic Political Landscape

The strategies of those implicated in the civil trend-Sadrist convergence were shaped by two critical episodes that converged in 2014-2015 to reconfigure the socio-structural and institutional parameters of opportunities and constraints which actors faced. The first, was the Islamic State crisis that saw the Sunni Islamist group overrun large swathes of Iraqi territory in northern and western Iraq from June 2014. The second, was an explosion of protests and civil unrest in Basra in the summer of 2015.[4] The conjunction of these episodes appeared to throw the legitimacy and durability of Iraq's political system into question, as it faced direct and simultaneous challenges in both its Sunni provinces and the Shiʿi heartlands of the south. This catalysed a systemic social crisis, analysed here as two distinct but interrelated forms of crisis localised in different parts of the Iraqi social system. The first, was a breakdown in intra-elite collusive exchanges of legitimation; and the second was a breakdown in the normative legitimacy between the elites and the governed.[5]

### *The Crisis of the Political Field*

Since 2003, the failure to build infrastructural power, to monopolise the use of force and tackle corruption and sectarianism precipitated a gradual loss of legitimacy for the Islamist-dominated political field. However, this crisis became more acute with the fall of Mosul to Islamic State in June 2014, and the outbreak of protest and civil unrest in Basra the

[4] Jabar, 'The Iraqi Protest Movement,' 17.
[5] Dobry defines normative legitimacy in this sense as a vertical relationship between the governed and the governing that function primarily through long-term process of socialisation. Horizontal forms of legitimation that flow from intra-elite collusive exchanges are distinct in the sense that they are often based on tactical-strategic calculations and are thus more susceptible to rapid reconfiguration. Dobry's formulation is intended to clarify how political systems can survive even when their levels of normative legitimacy among the governed has diminished. See Michel Dobry, 'Critical Processes and Political Fluidity: A Theoretical Appraisal,' *International Political Anthropology* 2, no. 1 (2009), 10.

following summer. Participation in the political field increasingly entailed a heavy cost in terms of prestige and legitimacy.[6] This also coincided with a budget crisis as a result of war, corruption and falling global oil prices.[7] Austerity and service cuts (in early 2015 the Iraqi government suspended or slowed payments to a significant number of public sector workers who account for 40 percent of the labour force),[8] meant the capacity of the political field to circumvent contentious political mobilisation and reproduce itself as a socially autonomous domain was curtailed.

This precipitated a social crisis for the political field which manifested as a breakdown in collusive exchanges of legitimation and a further exacerbation of existing fractures in these relationships. This breakdown was caused by attempts at inter-elite differentiation and distancing and by attempts to locate new sources of legitimacy. This produced two strategic adaptions for political elites. First, a recognition of the need to find a new set of political ideas to revive the symbolic and to a lesser extent material value of the political field as a whole.[9] And second, a need to restructure their own bases of legitimacy by drawing on new forms of symbolic capital. Both strategies directed political elites towards the civil trend and their mobilisation in the 2015 protest movement. Thus, the collapse in the symbolic value of the political field inflated the value of the civil trend's symbolic capital for political actors.

Consequently, protesters' demands (ending the sectarian and party quotas), were adopted as the political language of reform across much of the political spectrum. Responding directly to demonstrators, the then-Prime Minister Haider al-'Abadi made the idea of technocratic ministerial appointments a central component of his much-vaunted package of political of reforms.[10] Other political actors sought, directly or indirectly, to tap into the civil trend's symbolic capital. For example, in March 2017, Salim al-Jabouri's (a leading Sunni politician) announced the formation of a new electoral coalition, the 'Civil

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[6] A good example was the deaths of 12 babies in a Baghdad hospital fire that was blamed on corruption. Sadrists have dominated the health ministry for many years. 'At least 12 babies killed in Baghdad hospital fire,' *al-Jazeera*, November 8, 2016. http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/08/11-babies-killed-baghdad-hospital-fire-160810063620919.html.

[7] Oil revenues represented 43 percent of Iraqi GDP, 99 percent of exports, and 90 percent of federal revenues in 2015. See Matt Bradley, 'Iraq Plagued by Budget Crisis,' *Wall Street Journal*, November 5, 2014, https://www.wsj.com/articles/iraq-plagued-by-budget-crisis-amid-menace-of-islamic-state-1415231221#:VdqLUsv4O0mVBA.

[8] Borzou Daragahi, 'Iraq's cash crisis forces salary squeeze,' *Financial Times*, February 23, 2015, https://www.ft.com/content/23f1c6d0-b9e0-11e4-933f-00144feab7de.

[9] Pierre Bourdieu described a logic of field solidarity, i.e. an implicit recognition amongst participants in a social field of the need to sustain the value of the field as an object of collective struggle.

[10] Although he was never able to implement it. These ideas were also embraced nominally by the so-called 'opposition bloc' in parliament (widely believed at the time to be a Maliki-orchestrated front).

Assembly for Reform' (al-Tajammu' al-Madani lil-Islah), a highly symbolic discursive shift. Jabouri, previously affiliated with the Iraqi Islamic Party (the Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood), stated that 'the current conditions in the country are heading towards a civil state and not the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood.'[11] Civil trend leaders denounced the move as a cynical attempt to appropriate the political ideas and symbols of the protests as they gained popularity.[12]

Consequently, the crisis of the political field, coinciding with the outbreak of major protests in 2015, represented a critical episode during which the symbolic stakes of the civil trend, quite rapidly, became both more valuable for political actors and more mobile and subject to competing claims. This critical juncture represented an unique and potentially narrow window of opportunity for the civil trend to try and stake out positions of influence within the political field. However, it also opened up the movement to the risk of co-optation and to increased pressures (including threats of physical violence) by rival groups seeking to resist and neuter the movement's growing influence. These are both aspects of the breakdown in collusive intra-elite exchanges of legitimation, i.e. the opening up of new strategic possibilities to penetrate the political field and reshape dominant political discourses; and the drawing of the civil trend elites and their symbolic stakes into the collusive transactions of the horizontal production of legitimation between elites.

The crisis of the political field was not merely one of legitimacy, it also impacted on its coercive capacities in ways that would shape the actors' strategic calculations. Many civil trend activists who assumed prominent positions in the reform protest movement had been active during the 2011 demonstrations during the Maliki premiership.[13] This mobilization was met with severe state repression, the killing of protesters by security forces, the assassination of activists and arrests targeting civic groups.[14] In subsequent rounds of protest, other groups, including Baʿthists, tribal groupings and Sunni Islamist militants, moved quickly to exploit the escalating confrontation between protesters and security

[11] *Muwazin*, February 26, 2017. https://goo.gl/AhcxwN; and *al-Ghad,* February 26, 2017. https://goo.gl/4ZBw37.
[12] Jassim al-Helfi, February 28, 2017, Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/jassim.alhelfi/posts/10211110734379618.
[13] Joel Rayburn, *Iraq After America: Strongmen, Sectarians, Resistance* (Stanford: Hoover Institute, 2014), 216-219; Haifa Zangana, 'Iraq,' in *Dispatches from the Arab Spring,* eds. Paul Amar and Vijay Prashad (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
[14] In February 2011, Iraqi security forces opened fired on protesters in several cities killing about thirty, see Rayburn, *Iraq After America,* 218.

forces. Consequently, the civil trend was rapidly displaced from its prominent role within the protests and the 'Iraqi Spring' degenerated into sectarian violence.[15]

However, by August 2015 Maliki had been forced from power, tipping the state's coercive apparatus, which had been highly centralised around Maliki's personalised structure of authority,[16] into a more fragmented and less coherent state. Consequently, in 2015, protesters faced a less unified apparatus of state coercion and repression through physical as well as material mechanisms. Their early experience showed that the more pressing concern was the horizontal threat posed by Shiʿi Islamist non-state actors, not state security forces.[17] This made protest mobilisation a more viable strategy to contest political power, but only within the limits imposed by a more unpredictable array of Islamist militias with competing allegiances and interests.

However, the nature of this intra-militia competition, which distinguished the new coercive landscape, also provided strategic openings for the civil trend to exploit. By seeking accommodation with these factions, the civil trend could neutralise this threat, or acquire protection by balancing one group against another. In fact, this dynamic became explicit in May 2017 when, following a series of attacks and kidnappings that targeted the civil trend (in which 'Asa'ib was suspected of involvement), a joint civil trend-Sadrist press conference was held in which Muqtada announced that he would take responsibility for protecting the civil trend from other non-state actors.[18] In effect, the Sadr movement had become the coercive wing of the civil trend, lending it a coercive capacity, even if primarily defensive in nature, that the movement had never previously possessed.

### *The Exacerbation of Shiʿi Islamist Cleavages*

The same conjunctures described above also accentuated cleavages within the Shiʿi Islamist camp acting as a further factor in the breakdown of intra-elite collusive exchanges of legitimation between those groups anchoring the political system. The Sadrist movement was at the heart of this dysfunction owing to its fractious relationship with other Shiʿi

[15] Rayburn, *Iraq After America,* 216-219; and Zangana, *"Iraq".*
[16] This process has been discussed in most detail in Toby Dodge, *Iraq from War to a New Authoritarianism* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
[17] During the second demonstration many civil trend activists were assaulted by gangs linked to 'Asa'ib who forced them to retreat from Tahrir Square.
[18] Muqtada al-Sadr, May 21, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WMb3pDwC1UM.

Islamist political and paramilitary groups which peaked in 2007-2008.[19] However, despite these intra-elite conflicts, the Shiʿi Islamist bloc had always managed to unify in the face of external threats, and, alongside a supportive role played by the *marja'iyya,* had maintained the sect-based logic of political power.[20]

However, the Islamic State crisis and subsequent expansion of Shiʿi Islamist paramilitaries and, through this expansion, greater Iranian penetration of the political field and the field of violence, appeared to push this already fraying logic of power to breaking point. Muqtada and Sistani worked in tandem to help push Maliki from power in August 2015, and the Sadrists assumed increasingly antagonistic stances towards the Shiʿi Islamist political elite and particularly its most pro-Iranian elements. Muqtada sought to give the appearance of divesting from the political field and its sectarian power structure. He withdrew the Sadrist party, al-Aḥrar, from key political institutions and networks, leaving parliament temporarily[21] and from March 2016 suspended association with the Iraqi National Alliance (INA), the platform used to unite Iraq's main Shiʿi Islamist parties and which enjoyed Iranian support. The Sadrists would not return to this political alliance, despite intense pressure from Iran and continued negotiations with the alliance's other parties.[22]

These cleavages were exacerbated by the expansion of Iranian penetration following the emergence of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi from June 2014. For the Sadrists, this entailed a dramatic increase in the power of rival paramilitaries within the field of violence (Iranian-backed entities such as Badr, Kata'ib Hizbullah, 'Asa'ib, Kata'ib al-Imam 'Ali and Harakat al-Nujaba'), many of which were also splinter groups from the Sadr movement. These groups expanded in size, recruiting tens of thousands of additional fighters.[23] Sadrist splinter groups in the so-called Special Groups saw the biggest expansions.[24] Moreover, the growing power of these militias further consolidated Iran's political penetration, and accentuated competition with the Sadrists in the political field. 'Asa'ib's political activity, for example, expanded and in early 2018 the group joined al-Fataḥ (Conquest), an electoral coalition headed by Badr's Hadi al-'Amiri and containing the other major Iranian-backed

[19] See chapter three.
[20] See chapter four.
[21] *Al-Arabia*, April 20, 2016. https://goo.gl/y7IKnb.
[22] *Rudaw*, October 1, 2016. http://rudaw.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/3009201612.
[23] The most detailed assessment of current PMF size and the growth of its different factions since 2014 is from Michael Knights, 'Iraq's Expanding Militia Army,' *CTC Sentinel,* August 2019.
[24] Knights, 'Iraq's Expanding Militia'.

Shiʿi formations.[25] These groups went on to make significant electoral gains in 2018 based, in part, on the prestige of battlefield victories against Islamic State.[26]

In response to these pressures, the Sadrists sought to differentiate their position and delegitimise their competitors. One aspect of this was a ramping up of Iraqist-nationalist rhetoric, playing on the 'insider-outsider' tension in Iraqi politics which the Sadrists have frequently exploited to discredit religious and political opponents.[27] At times this took on an anti-Iranian dimension, explaining why, during the storming of the Iraqi parliament on April 30, 2016, Sadrist protesters were chanting 'Iran out out!' alongside slogans targeting Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani (the linchpin in Iran's Iraqi militia networks).[28]

The Sadrists also differentiated their paramilitary forces from the Iranian-backed components of the Hashd. While all the militias draw legitimacy from Sistani's 2014 fatwa, Sistani himself has tended not to use the term 'al-Hashd al-Sha'bi,' preferring 'volunteers,' an attempt to limit how his symbolic legitimacy could be appropriated by certain factions. Consequently, as Fanar Haddad has argued, a distinction emerged, particularly in symbolic terms, between 'al-Hashd al-Maraji'i,' denoting formations linked to *al-ʿatabāt* (the shrines) and the Najafi religious hierarchy, and 'al-Hashd al-Wala'i,' denoting formations that were integrated into Iranian networks and loyal to, or who followed, 'Ali Khamenei as *faqīh*.[29] This carved out an Iraqist-nationalist space within which the Sadrists positioned Jaysh al-Mahdi, now rebranded as the 'Peace Companies' (Saraya al-Salam). Thus, like 'Asa'ib, Badr and others the Sadrists sought to exploit the Hashd's legitimating resources (Muqtada even appeared in military uniform in a series of election posters).[30] However, Muqtada's discourse was more fraught with ambiguity and often critical of particular (Iranian-backed) militias.[31] He also refused to engage his forces alongside Iranian proxies in Syria and called

[25] Kirk H. Sowell, 'Iraq's Status Quo Elections,' *Carnegie Endowment,* February 8, 2018. http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/75488
[26] 'Asa'ib contested the 2014 elections as part of Maliki's State of Law (Dawlat al-Qanun) coalition, winning just one seat. By early 2018, the prospect of Maliki staging a political comeback had waned significantly.
[27] Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (London: Hurst, 2008), 260-1.
[28] 'Ali Mamouri, 'Why Shiʿites are divided over Iranian role in Iraq,' *al-Monitor*, May 12, 2016. http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/05/sadrist-stances-iraqi-shiites-opposing-iranian-policy.html.
[29] Fanar Haddad, 'Understanding Iraq's Hashd al-Sha'bi,' *The Century Foundation,* March 5, 2018. https://tcf.org/content/report/understanding-iraqs-hashd-al-shabi/.
[30] Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, 'Muqtada al-Sadr wears military uniform,' *Iraq After Occupation,* July 12, 2016..https://benedictrobin.wordpress.com/2016/07/12/muqtada-al-sadr-wears-military-uniform-some-thoughts-on-the-secularisation-of-muqtada-al-sadr/
[31] Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, 'The political discourse of 'Ali al-Sistani and Muqtada al-Sadr on al-Hashd al-Sha'bi' (Masters diss., University of Edinburgh, 2016).

for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down, positions which sought to stake out an Iraqist-nationalist orientation in contradistinction to Iranian interests.[32]

The Hashd and the protest movement thus became two distinct domains in which new Iraqi national mythologies and forms of symbolic legitimacy were being fashioned. These mythologies shared an oppositional posture vis-à-vis a discredited political elite. Iranian-backed groups, like Badr and 'Asa'ib, would ultimately utilise the Hashd to try and revivify Shiʿi Islamist politics. However, the Sadrists' orientation towards, and position within, the field of violence was more fraught and complex than many of the movement's rivals. The Sadrists, by comparison, were also more heavily invested in other spheres of action which entailed distinct forms of legitimation that rivalled those that belonged to the field of violence. Thus, Sadrist engagement in this latter domain increasingly played to its rivals' strengths, whereas the protest movement played to the Sadrists' strengths, i.e. their greater social linkages into the movement's social base which could be mobilised for demonstrations.

### *The Crisis in Vertical Legitimation*

The dynamics of crisis outlined above were fundamentally about fragmentations and realignments in patterns of intra-elite collusive relationships. However, this crisis intersected with a crisis of normative legitimacy amongst nonelite sections of Iraqi society that ran vertically between various elite groupings and the governed. This latter crisis manifested in critical episodes of protest and civil unrest, particularly on the periphery of the socio-political system in places like Basra.

Beginning with the Electricity Intifada in 2010, Basra had been the epicentre for new forms of popular politics that exposed deep cleavages between ordinary citizens and the political class.[33] Protests erupted again in 2015, with spontaneous and sporadic demonstrations in Basra over poor services, particularly electricity, and corruption. These protests were catalysed by the killing of 18-year-old protester Muntathir al-Helfi by security forces in mid-July.[34] This was a new nadir for the normative legitimacy of the political field.

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[32] 'Muqtada becomes first Iraqi Shiʿite leader to urge Assad to step down,' *Reuters,* April 9, 2017. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-syria-sadr/sadr-becomes-first-iraqi-shiite-leader-to-urge-assad-to-step-down-idUSKBN17B070

[33] See chapter four.

[34] Jabar, 'The Iraqi Protest Movement,' 17.

Even in the so-called 'Shiʿi heartlands' of the south, whom the Shiʿi Islamist parties claimed primarily to represent and from where the majority of the volunteer manpower for the ongoing war with Islamic State was drawn, the reservoir of legitimacy for the political class was drying up.

The two crises dynamically interacted. The vertical crisis spurred elites to seek out new forms of legitimation, attempting to bring previously subordinated or excluded sections of the elite (i.e., the civil trend elites) into new collusive exchanges within the political field. However, what transformed these previously excluded elites into valuable sources of legitimation was, in large part, their supposed social embeddedness with the protests. The civil trend, therefore, acted as mediator between the political field and the protests and sought to create a new political role for itself in the process.

The different operative dynamics of these two modes of crisis (horizontal and vertical) is crucial in explaining the strategic politics of those involved. Existing analyses of Iraq's protest movements have tended to construe the transition of protests from Basra and the south to Baghdad as a fairly smooth process of welding additional social forces into a larger but still fairly homogenous and ideologically coherent movement.[35] Jabar, for instance, writes that, as the protest movement spread from Basra and the south to Baghdad:

> It evolved from a protest against woeful services to targeting corruption and demanding reform of the political system by doing away with the sectarian-ethnic quota arrangement and aspiring towards the creation of a secular state. Such shifts are not alien to radical social movements; they signify a switch from direct outrage to a maturity focusing on the root causes of the problem or issues motivating the protesters. Interaction between the movement's young activists and veteran participants, especially leaders of the February 2011 'Iraqi Spring', contributed to these shifts.

However, this picture obscures the dynamics of intra-movement struggle that were produced by the structuring effects of two distinct social terrains of crisis across which the protest movement was dispersed. What Jabar paints as a smooth conglomeration of social forces and a maturing of the movement into a more political posture, was actually a highly contested and conflict-fraught processes that is explored below.

[35] Jabar, 'The Iraqi Protest Movement,' 17; see also 'The Civil Protest Movement in Iraq post July 31, 2015: Formations Mechanisms and Future Scenarios' *Masarat,* October, 2015. This latter report on the 2015 protest movement also glosses over its internal, competitive dynamics.

## III
## Transverse Cleavages: Dynamics of Intra-Movement Struggle

Systemic social crises acted to reconfigure field dynamics and institutional structures of opportunity and constraint that parameterised actors' strategic calculations and behaviour. However, these crises also intersected with endogenous processes of intra-movement social struggle that were equally important in shaping the strategic politics of the civil trend-Sadrist convergence. Some of these transverse cleavages were triggered, or expanded, by the effects of the social crises outlined above. However, others resulted from more long-term processes of socialisation whose roots have been analysed in previous chapters. This section explores how transverse movement struggles fed into the civil trend-Sadrist convergence from 2015.

### *The Civil Trend and Transverse Cleavages*

As argued in chapter four, the civil trend was characterised by transverse cleavages that reflected, in part, the social terrain of the Iraqi secular intellectual field from which it emerged. The authority to speak on behalf of Mutanabbi Street was the focus of the field's internal contestation and resistance to politicisation of the intelligentsia's social and symbolic capital was an important facet of this struggle. Nevertheless, while many field participants valued political autonomy, the close social interweaving of the field with the ICP meant that it always contained an inherent potential for politicisation. It was the social crises outlined above and the emergence of new forms of popular politics that provided an opportunity for the ICP, alongside a range of other prominent civil trend personalities and minor political parties, to try and mobilise the stakes of the intellectual field within a politically-oriented strategy. However, both the process of politicisation itself and the leadership of this new political framework, were sources of conflict within the civil trend.

This struggle over leadership was intensified by the civil trend's lack of institutionalisation and the absence of a clear framework within which to decide key questions regarding who could speak on behalf of the movement, formulate its strategy and enter into negotiations with other actors and groups. This circumstance was further exacerbated by the surrounding conditions of social crisis which entailed a loosening of sectoral logics. The greater mobility of social stakes which this entailed saw positions of considerable influence suddenly open up for a range of actors not normally at the centre of political life. As the civil

trend's social stakes suddenly grew in value and mobility, the questions around who would assume these new positions of authority only became more contentious.

Political leadership of the civil trend was a contentious issue between its main political players. The most prominent actors were those who came together in the Civil Democratic Alliance (CDA) to contest the 2014 elections: the ICP, Mithal al-Alusi, Faikh al-Shaykh Ali, Shirouk al-'Abayachi, and Faris Jajo. The ICP constituted the movement's best organised and only mass membership political entity, but the Party tried to obscure its political dominance which generated resistance from other actors. This explains why an independent academic, 'Ali Kadhem Aziz al-Rufa'i, was made the CDA's nominal head. The other major personality and vote-winner in the CDA was Mithal al-Alusi and his one-man al-Ummah Party. Conversations the author held with ICP and civil trend activists suggested a degree of ambivalence towards Alusi, perhaps arising from their perception that he has proven a highly pragmatic political operator (he worked with Ahmad Chalibi and the Iraqi National Congress (INC), and, more recently, threw his support behind Masoud Barzani and Kurdish independence). Alusi would not follow the ICP into the alliance with the Sadr movement.

Moreover, the failure of the CDA in the 2014 elections, and particularly its failure to deliver political power for the ICP, exacerbated conflicts within the civil trend's political leadership. This was particularly evident in the breakdown in relations between the ICP and another important civil trend political actor, Shirouk al-'Abayachi (a prominent female civil activist and politician). In the 2014 elections, the ICP's highest placed candidate on the CDA list, Jassim al-Helfi, came third with 17,000 votes in Baghdad, but lost his seat to 'Abayachi because of the quota system for women and minorities. This outcome generated considerable animosity, particularly between the ICP, its allies, and 'Abayachi. In an interview which the author conducted with 'Abayachi in Erbil in 2017, she explained how the 2014 elections were meant to be a springboard for progressing the civil trend as a united political alliance, but, in the end, the results caused further fragmentation of the movement:

> In 2014, when we three deputies [Alusi, Shaykh 'Ali and 'Abayachi] reached parliament as part of the CDA it was meant to be the moment that this coalition transformed into a political framework for all the civil [*madanī]*forces. Unfortunately, I will be frank with you, we three reached parliament, but the CDA needed to get more than ten or fifteen seats. Because of some agreement or political decision, the CDA only got three seats. The ICP was not amongst the seats. For this reason, for me personally, the Communists started

> to fight against me, and began to publicly declare that these deputies do not represent the ICP and that Shirouk al-'Abayachi got into parliament with ours votes.[36]

Jassim al-Helfi was the ICP political operative who led parts of the civil trend and the ICP into alliance with the Sadr movement from 2015.

Helfi's role in attempting to drive the civil trend into the Sadrist convergence was fiercely contested within the movement. Thus, 'Abayachi, during the 2017 interview (before the ICP-Sadrist alliance became official), told the author:

> What happened in Tahrir square is that some individuals imposed themselves as representatives of the civil forces in interactions with the Sadrists… I do not think that there is an agreement between the civil trend and the Sadrists, rather, there is a convergence between some individuals in the civil movement and the Sadrist trend, *individuals who do not even represent the ICP*. [Emphasis added].

Clearly, 'Abayachi and her allies saw Helfi's leadership role as an illegitimate attempt to seize control of the protest movement, claiming he did not represent the civil trend, nor even the ICP. This latter claim points to the ambiguity surrounding Helfi's role, and that of the ICP. Was he acting as an official representative of the ICP, or independently as a civil trend activist? In fact, it was precisely this ambiguity which Helfi sought to exploit in pursuit of this strategy.[37]

This fragmentation within the civil trend's political leadership was paralleled by cleavages within the leadership of the protest movement itself. Here, a distinct layer of loosely institutionalised social movement organisations was created, constituted by coordinating committees including prominent activists. However, the structure and leadership of these organisations became contested issues. These were partly oriented around cleavages between the protest movement and the civil trend's political leadership, and partly around a centre-periphery divide between Basra and the Baghdad-centric civil trend elite. The civil trend-Sadrist convergence, which was spearheaded by a number of the movement's Baghdad-based leadership (most prominently Ahmad 'Abd al-Hussein and Jassim al-Helfi), exploded these preexisting cleavages, leading to a deep fragmentation of the protest movement and the civil trend. This fragmentation was not just institutional and organisational, but percolated down into the social networks and friendships between civil trend actors which were frayed to breaking point.

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[36] Shirouk al-'Abayachi, interview by author, Erbil, Iraq, August 13, 2017.
[37] See chapter six.

One woman at the heart of this intra-movement conflict was Amal Hussein (known within the protest movement as Amal al-Sajir).[38] Hussein studied political science at the University of Baghdad, and law at al-Mustansiriya University (also in Baghdad), and was formerly a member of the ICP, having left the Party prior to the 2003 invasion. After the invasion, Hussein was involved in many civil society groups, and later became a key player in efforts to organise and institutionalise the protests that erupted in the spring of 2015. These protests began with a campaign to reduce the salaries and benefits of MPs and involved a range of activities including protests and vigils held in several cities. Hussein told the author:

> After these protests, a meeting was held by the activists and an agreement was reached to form coordination committees to organise actions and take the role of popular control. [Even at this early stage] the ICP were opposing this structure, on the basis that the protest movement was spontaneous. Nevertheless, the committees were formed and went by the name of the Coordination Committees of the Iraqi Civil Movement (Tansiqiyyat al-Hirak al-Madani al-'Iraqi*)*. There were committees in Baghdad, Diyala, Wasit, Dhi Qar, Diwaniyah, Samawah [Muthanna] and Basra. All these committees were connected via a general conference held in one of the provinces which issued binding decisions on the rest of the provincial committees. This is how our work progressed.

This organisational structure became known as the Iraqi civil movement (al-Hirak al-Madani) and was designed to try and integrate civil trend activism across central and southern Iraq, and also to provide a unified strategic orientation to the movement's mobilisations and activism on the ground. Despite the ICP rejecting the institutional structure of al-Hirak al-Madani, many of its members remained participants in the committees, acting independently as civil activists. Amal Hussein became a key member of the Baghdad committee, branded as 'al-Hirak al-Madani / Mustamirun', which was often shortened to just 'Mustamirun' (Persisting).[39] It is important to note that neither Ahmad 'Abd al-Hussein nor Jassim al-Helfi were members of this body.

In mid-July 2015, the killing by local police of Muntathir al-Helfi, a young protester in Basra, served as a major catalyst for more widespread protest and social unrest, particularly in Basra province itself. This set in motion a frequently observed centre-periphery dynamic whereby the Baghdad-based civil trend leadership sought to integrate the popular politics of Basra into its own frameworks for political action. Consequently, following Helfi's dealth, Mustamirun Baghdad sent a delegation to Basra to meet with the

[38] Amal Hussein, interview by author via electronic communication, August 19, 2017.
[39] Other members included: Ali Hashem, Haidar 'Abd al-Baqi, Widad al-Shamri, 'Amad Taha, Dr Kazem al-Sahlani.

victim's family, and staged a silent vigil in protest over his killing. Meanwhile, at midnight on Sunday 26 July, in an action that was uncoordinated with Mustamirun Baghdad, Ahmad 'Abd al-Hussein put out a call via Facebook for protests in Baghdad's Tahrir Square that coming Friday (31 July).[40] 'Abd al-Hussein told the author:[41]

> I was stunned by the degree of interaction with my call on Facebook. The same night I was contacted by several of my friends saying that we must meet to prepare for the protests that should be huge. We met on Tuesday at the Mazaj restaurant in Karrada (myself, 'Ali al-Jaf, Nabil Jasim, Bisam 'Abd al-Razaq, 'Amar Mu'yad, Baha' Kamal [ICP], 'Ali al-Khalidi, Hissam al-Haj and Fariq 'Abd al-Jabar.

During this meeting at Mazaj, the activists made key decisions about the slogans and tactics of the upcoming demonstration:

> It was agreed to activate the call for demonstrations, and to agree on slogans, and the need to continue to protests, that it not be just a one-off demonstration. We also agreed that our demonstration will be in solidarity with protests in the south, with the slogan of the martyr Muntathir al-Helfi, and to raise the same slogans as the demonstrations in the south, which were focused on the provision of services.

'Abd al-Hussein had expected perhaps a few hundred to show up for the protest on 31 July, but in the event many thousands took to the streets, forcing Prime Minister Haider al-'Abadi to respond directly to the protesters and announce plans for far-reaching political reforms. Thus, Jabar argues that 31 July 'saw a massive protest movement launched in solidarity with Basra,' but which also saw the emergence of centre-periphery struggles and leadership conflicts surrounding this new movement.[42]

It was at this stage that the two civil trend leadership groups converged in Baghdad, and efforts were made to construct a single umbrella group to coordinate their activities and maintain links between the Baghdad-centric civil trend leadership and the protest movement in the provinces. However, these efforts never resolved thorny questions about leadership and the involvement of political parties, principally the ICP. Amal Hussein recalled:

> After the huge protests, al-Hirak al-Madani / Mustamirun convened a conference in Baghdad in order to unite the visions and demands [of the protesters]. This conference sought to bring together the various protest groups, and it was here that Ahmad 'Abd al-Hussein and Jassim al-Helfi were present [for the first time]. We agreed to establish a joint working committee, and it was then that 'Abd al-Hussein and Helfi began to talk in

[40] Chapter four traced 'Abd al-Hussein's rise to prominence within the civil trend, helping to explain why his call for protests in 2015 acted as a trigger event for a major mobilisation.
[41] Quotes here are drawn from interviews and discussion between the author and Ahmad 'Abd al-Hussein between 2015-2019.
[42] Jabar, 'The Iraqi Protest Movement,' 17.

> the name of 'Mustamirun,' but they were not members of al-Hirak al-Madani / Mustamirun.

Instead of institutionalising a broader civil trend leadership with a united strategic orientation, the new joint committee fragmented around power struggles between the activists and political parties, and between Baghdad and Basra.

Jassim al-Helfi's and Ahmad 'Abd al-Hussein's strategic pivot towards the Sadrists, encouraging cooperation with the Islamist movement in the ongoing protests, exploded these intra-movement cleavages. As far as Amal Hussein and al-Hirak al-Madani / Mustamirun were concerned, Helfi and 'Abd al-Hussein had hijacked their organisation, taken its branding and slogans, and exploited them to create the appearance of leadership and representation of a broader platform and movement than was actually the case:

> Ahmad 'Abd al-Hussein and Jassim al-Helfi started to talk in the name of the 'civil trend – Mustamirun,' so they took the name 'Mustamirun' and the broad tent of the civil trend. Then the Sadrists came into the scene, and they entered into alliances, conferences, meetings etc. with Muqtada al-Sadr. We, as al-Hirak al-Madani Baghdad / Mustamirun, cut off any relationship with these joint actions [with the Sadr movement]. This, of course, was the first blow to the civil movement, and led to the withdrawal of its popular force.

Amal Hussein was scathing in her assessment of the 'Abd al-Hussein-Helfi duumvirate:

> Frankly, Ahmad is a journalist, but was a student in in the *hawza* in Iran. Jassim is a member of the Central Committee of the ICP, and in my opinion the ICP missed a huge opportunity here to lead the street and become the opposition to the Islamist parties.

By noting 'Abd al-Hussein's past involvement in religious institutions and Islamist politics (see Chapter Four), Amal Hussein was casting doubt on his credentials as a genuine secularist, a strategy that was used many times by those opposing the civil trend-Sadrist convergence.[43]

From 'Abd al-Hussein and Helfi's perspective, Amal Hussein and her colleagues in al-Hirak al-Madani (which included Shirouk al-'Abayachi), were small-time players with considerably less profile and influence within the civil trend and broader political scene than themselves. This judgement was rooted both in their high-profile involvement in previous rounds of protests in 2009 and 2011, and by the huge scale of the popular mobilisation they appeared to have instigated in Baghdad. The outcome of this dispute was a total breakdown in coordination and social relations between those involved. Since al-Hirak al-Madani had been the organisational link between Baghdad and the central and southern

[43] For example, see Karim al-Thuri, 'Ahmad ʿAbd al-Husayn Mara Ukhra,' *al-Muthaqaf*, May 25, 2016. http://www.almothaqaf.com/memoir/905977.html

provinces, especially Basra, this intra-movement conflict also factored into the centre-periphery axis of struggle within the civil trend. This struggle was also about politicisation of the movement, since the civil trend in Baghdad was more integrated into party-politics, particularly via the ICP, than the activist seeking to organise the protest movement in Basra where the ICP remains organisationally weak.

In Basra, the spokesman for al-Hirak al-Madani was the prominent civil trend activist Dr Kazem al-Sahlani who teaches at the University of Basra.[44] Sahlani was the Basra representative for al-Hirak al-Madani at the conferences and meetings that were held in Baghdad. The narrative he told the author regarding the protest movement in Basra, and its relationship with the central leadership, points to how this resistance to politicisation of the protest movement maps onto this centre-periphery tension:

> There is no such thing as the civil trend, it is an inflated term that was launched as an alternative to al-Hirak al-Madani because the latter movement only includes [politically] independent activists. After the political parties entered the field of protest for their own reasons, they started to use the term 'civil trend' rather than al-Hirak al-Madani.

Sahlani also described the strategy of the protest movement in Basra:

> The strategic thinking behind [al-Hirak al-Madani] Mustamirun was to establish effective and continuous popular constraints on [political] authority. So Mustamirun does not possess a political programme, and one its key principles was that it would not transform into a political entity and any of its members who enter into the elections must freeze their membership.

Consequently, the strand of the civil trend which Sahlani represented sought to maintain its political independence, not just from the Sadr movement, but also from the ICP and other political actors in the civil trend which Sahlani construed, contra the author's definition, as a term denoting only a group of political actors.

Sahlani regarded the Baghdad-centric leadership of civil trend, and especially those forces organised around 'Abd al-Hussein and Helfi, as usurping control of the protest movement and implicating it in party-politics. This was a significant strategic error from Sahlani's perspective:

> The movement that Jassim al-Helfi and Ahmad 'Abd al-Hussein speak for is a party-political [*ḥaraka ḥizbiyya*] movement controlled and dominated by the ICP. It has committed a major mistake which has affected the protest movement. They stole the

[44] Kazem al-Sahlani, interview by author via electronic communication, August 28, 2019. Sahlani would remain a prominent activist in Basra through to the summer of 2019 when he was kidnapped by militias and dumped in the desert as a warning against his political activism. His family were also threatened with liquidation.

> name of our movement [Mustamirun], an act that would only come from an opportunistic party-movement. They have identified with the Sadrists and fallen under a single leadership. This means they are not aligning with us ideologically, in orientation or ambitions. We think they have badly affected the protest movement, so many of the *madaniyyūn* do not trust them and do not want to cooperate with political parties.

Here, again, it is possible to see how the strategic pivot towards the Sadr movement exploded preexisting dynamics of intra-movement struggle, layering a strategic and ideological disagreement onto preexisting social fractures over leadership and politicisation of the civil trend.

This resistance to the politicisation of the protest movement, and particularly to cooperation with the Sadr movement, also opened up divisions within the Baghdad-centric civil elites too. For instance, the journalist and civil trend activist Sadoun Mohsen Thamad represented a strand within the civil elites in Baghdad that also sought to resist politicisation, not so much of the protest movement, but of the civil trend as it had emerged in 2009 as a movement of the secular intelligentsia. When the author interviewed Thamad in Iraq in 2017, the activist made clear that his opposition to the civil trend-Sadrist alliance was not merely rooted in ideological opposition to the Sadr movement, but also to the ICP and its role in politicising the civil trend.[45] Thamad launched a rival group to Mustamirun called Madaniyyun (sing. *madanī,* denoting a civil activist). Madaniyyun was not a protest-oriented group, but one focused on cultural activities and raising consciousness. It was also emphatically opposed to the politicisation of the intellectual field's symbolic capital, regarding the intelligentsia's moral authority as predicated fundamentally on their autonomy from the political field.

Ultimately, multiple rival groups emerged within the civil trend. There were two protest-oriented groups, both using the name and slogans of 'Mustamirun,' but one was more cantered in Basra and the other in Baghdad. Further splinters occurred within the civil elites in Baghdad, with numerous activists abandoning the project of convergence with the Sadr movement and retreating from politics and protest into more culturally oriented activity. This category was primarily interested in protecting the autonomy of the intelligentsia from politics.[46] None of these civil trend groups were fully integrated and socially embedded with the protesters themselves. Rather, they competed to build social linkages into the social

[45] Saadun Mohsen Thamad, interview by author, Sulaymaniyah, Iraq, September 13, 2017.
[46] See Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, 'The Sadrist–Communist Alliance: Implications for Iraq's Secular Politics' *LSE Middle East Centre*, June 6, 2018. http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/06/06/the-sadrist-communist-alliance-implications-for-iraqs-secular-politics/

bases of the protests and to claim leadership over them. These were profound ruptures that fragmented the civil trend's leadership, organisational coherence and strategic orientations. These transverse cleavages help explain a remarkable feature of the civil trend-Sadrist convergence, i.e. how certain individuals were willing to put at risk the social relationships and the standing they enjoyed with other actors and groups with whom they shared far more – in terms of their ideological and cultural proclivities, contexts of socialization, action and social networks – than they did with the individuals and groups with whom they entered into new forms of political cooperation.

These transverse movement cleavages also altered the strategic landscape for actors external to the civil trend, providing tactical openings for those seeking to build forms of cross-movement cooperation (or co-optation). Many civil trend activists believed that the Sadr movement was attempting to create this fragmentation through its strategy of convergence. However, the author's impression from interactions with the Sadrist side of the alliance suggests a more complex dynamic. On the one hand, transverse cleavages within the civil trend were important in creating strategic openings for the Sadr movement to draw parts of the civil trend into its orbit. However, the Sadr movement also recognised that the symbolic legitimation that the civil trend could confer would be dissipated if the movement split, elements withdrew, and the protests ceased to be a pluralistic domain, becoming a mere extension of elite politics. Muqtada made this explicit in a statement to his followers, explaining that while the Sadrists could mobilise much larger numbers, the protest movement must remain 'pluralistic,' with the Sadrists acting alongside the civil trend who 'depict the greatest meaning of nationalism by their insistence on demonstrations for reform.'[47] Thus, Sadrists committed to the project of convergence worked hard behind the scenes to try and encourage unification of the civil trend. However, the more it fragmented the less strategic value the Sadrists saw in pursuing cross-ideological cooperation.[48]

### *The Sadr Movement and Transverse Cleavages*

Chapter three described the Sadr movement as internally differentiated along two primary axes. First, via weak vertical and hierarchic integration between the movement's leadership and multiple nodes of power anchored in highly localised contexts. And second, via weak

[47] Muqtada al-Sadr*, bayan*, June 14 2016. http://jawabna.com/index.php/permalink/9113.html.
[48] This was the how key Sadrist involved in the convergence, such as Dhia al-Asadi, 'Alaa' al-Baghdadi, and Hassan al-Ka'bi described their role to the author.

horizontal integration between its various leadership strata who are dispersed across multiple fields of distinct practice (clerical, intellectual, political and the field of violence). This differentiation gives rise to a plurality of social identities and attendant forms of political subjectivity and strategic interests. Consequently, the movement was characterised by transverse cleavages between a fragmented leadership who competed to shape Sadrist politics and vertical dynamics of struggle between these different leadership strata who competed for influence and authority over the movement's social base. Muqtada's role as the movement's leader was therefore less absolute than is often assumed and consisted primarily in forms of inter- and intra-factional brokerage and mediation.[49]

Of particular importance vis-à-vis the leftist-Sadrist alliance has been an emerging stratum of Sadrist cultural, intellectual and political activists with distinct perspectives from other parts of the movement. These strata are characterised by unique configurations of social, cultural and symbolic capital, typically acquired via their routine participation in spheres of action associated with Iraq's secular cultural and civic life (writers and journalistic unions, media, Mutanabbi Street, al-Qishla Gardens and the intellectual cafes and salons). The roots this of social embeddedness with Iraq's intellectual field were explored in chapter three as an aspect of the movement's turn from militant to 'cultural resistance' in 2009. This process opened up a conflict over the movement's symbolic marketplace, characterised as a distinction between political and intellectual activism (meaning not just politicians but journalists, intellectuals or any other role which seeks to influence the distribution of power between and within political structures);[50] and those whose routine practices belonged primarily to the religious field and 'management of the goods of salvation'.[51]

This stratum of the Sadrist cultural activist – owing to their particular configurations of social capital – was strategically located to play an important role as both advocates for the civil trend-Sadrist convergence within the Sadr movement, and as social brokers whose networks facilitated the process of coalition formation between the two camps. It was primarily (but not exclusively) through this stratum that the civil trend engaged with the Sadr

[49] Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (London: Cornell University Press, 2014). 30.
[50] Max Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation,' in *Weber's Rationalism and Modern Society*, eds. trans. Tony & Dagmar Waters (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 142.
[51] Or, in Weber-inspired terms, a contrast between the struggle to exert or share a monopoly on legitimate physical violence, and management of the goods of salvation. This takes inspiration from Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 164-165.

movement. Several leftist and Sadrist informants, particularly those supportive of the convergence, described these splits within the Sadr movement as a divide between '*al-munfatiḥīn'* and '*al-munghaliqīn*' (the 'open-minded' and 'closed-minded') Sadrists. The *munfatiḥīn* tended to be those engaged in cultural activities who were enmeshed in institutions, social spaces and networks that saw them interacting, cooperating (and competing) with a diverse range of actors outside the Sadr movement and Islamist currents. Thus, this trend saw itself as oriented toward 'opening up' the Sadr movement to other parts of Iraqi society and politics, as well as to the world outside Iraq. The '*munghaliqīn*' were concentrated in the more established and dominant strata of the movement, particularly its clerical stratum whose practices were more contained to the religious field.[52]

Shaykh Usama al-Musawi, the Imam and *khaṭīb al-jum'a* at al-Kufa Mosque, discussed this divergence from the perspective of this clerical stratum. This was an unusual instance of intra-Sadrist divergences being aired publicly, an indication of the strains that the civil trend-Sadrist convergence created. In a lengthy statement to his Sadrist followers on social media,[53] Musawi discussed the emergence of what he described as 'an internal conflict within the Sadrist line [*al-khaṭ ṣadrī*]'.[54] His analysis maps closely onto the theoretical interpretation outlined above. Musawi grouped Sadrist 'political leaders' and 'journalists, writers and philosophers' together as a nefarious alliance whose goal was 'attainment of the centres of political decision making.' According to Musawi, this was 'a purely political trend which thinks that all the human, economic, military and even religious capacities should serve only a single goal: the domination of authority and governing without any sacred or divine aspect.' He also described this group as a 'secular-liberal trend' within the Sadrist movement which 'is not interested in the religious and doctrinal details, considering these as merely tools, abiding by religion as long as it benefits them.'

Opposed to this group, in Musawi's analysis is 'the moderate religious [clerical] trend, which consists of the virtuous people who adopt from al-Sadr the pure Walaya approach…

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[52] This picture is further complicated by the number of Sadrist political actors who also resisted the civil trend-Sadrist convergence because it threatened their access to the resources that flowed from holding political offices.

[53] May 27, 2017, Usama al-Musawi on Facebook.

[54] Sadrists sometimes describe their movement using the phrase '*al-khaṭ al-ṣadrī*' (the Sadrist line) as opposed to '*al-tayyār al-ṣadrī*' (the Sadrist trend). It is tempting consider if these terms reflect two sides of the ideological struggle explored here. '*tayyār'* (trend) situates the Sadrists as a political-ideological movement amongst others e.g. the civil trend, or the Islamist trend. By contrast, '*khaṭ*' (line) emphasises the movements (religious) genealogical character rooted in a concept of familial clerical inheritance and religious authority. It would follow that a cleric such as Musawi would use the phrase '*al-khaṭ al-ṣadrī*' to define and differentiate the Sadrists in this latter way.

they are the purest and most virtuous section, and at the same time the other trend considers them a source of danger for their projects.' This statement seeks to re-establish normative clerical supremacy within the Sadr movement, and to differentiate the clerical function from other Sadrist social roles, limiting it, in highly Weberian tones, to the management of the goods of salvation in this life and the next. According to Musawi, Sadrist clerics practice 'the pure Walaya approach through which they make the farthest goal God the Almighty, and the nearest goal the Imam Mahdi.'

The Sadrist journalist 'Alaa' al-Baghdadi is an illustrative case from the other side of this divide, i.e. from the self-styled '*munfatiḥīn'* stratum of the Sadr movement.[55] Baghdadi described himself to the author as 'an activist in the cultural and media sphere of the Sadr movement,' and he has played a prominent role in these operations post-2003. After the invasion, the Sadrist media centre was established and began publishing the newspaper al-Hawza for which Baghdadi worked as deputy editor. After Paul Bremmer ordered al-Hawza to be closed down in March 2004, Baghdadi became deputy of the Sadrist cultural institute (*al-hay'a al-thaqāfiyya*). Later, Baghdadi became deputy of the Sadrist media committee (al-al-*hay'a al-'alāmiyya)*. Today, he is editor of the Sadrist magazine, Rusul (Messengers). Baghdadi was not a *hawza* student, and his social background reveals a consistent pattern of interaction with writers and journalistic unions, as well as the salon culture of the intellectual field. Consequently, his social networks criss-crossed secular-Sadrist domains and he counted many prominent civil trend activists amongst his professional and friendship circle.

Although Baghdad has been a fairly marginal actor, and not someone typically considered important in shaping Sadrist politics, his unusual combination of social capital enabled him to fulfil important functions in the civil trend-Sadrist convergence. First, Baghdadi was able to use his position in the Sadr movement's cultural sphere to promote the *munfatiḥīn'* orientation within the movement. One example is his editorship of Rusul, which vocally supported the civil trend-Sadrist convergence, including by publishing articles from members of the secular intelligentsia who supported the convergence. The February 2017 addition of *Rusul,* for example, included an interview with Faris Kamal Nadhmi (Baghdadi made this a cover feature). He also used Rusul to publish a condensed version

[55] Alaa al-Baghdadi, discussions with the author via electronic communication, 2016-2019. Baghdadi also provided the author with sections of his unpublished memoirs with cover the time period which is the focus of this thesis. Other examples featured in this thesis include Muhammad Abu Tamhid al-Sa'di, Dr 'Abd al-Jabar al-Hidjami and Dhia al-Asadi.

of Nadhmi's 2010 article arguing for a leftist-Sadrist alliance. During the 'sit-in demonstration' outside the Green Zone in March 2016 (more details below), Baghdadi used his connections with the secular intelligentsia and civil trend to publish an ad hoc newspaper (the National Sit-In Newspaper, Jaridat al-'Atisam al-Watani) which was a joint secular-Sadrist endeavour and included a range of articles by both sides of the coalition.

*Figure 8 Sadrist magazine Rusul, edited by 'Alaa' al-Baghdadi and featuring an interview with Faris Nadhmi. Images below are photographs from the author's physical copy of the magazine.*


Both these examples are illustrative primarily of Baghdadi's efforts to promote a particular cultural and ideological orientation within the Sadr movement. He did this by strategically exploiting spaces opened up initially by the Sadr movement's greater investment in 'cultural resistance,' from 2009, but especially by the movement's pivot toward the civil trend from 2015. Baghdadi described this cultural and ideological orientation (the orientation of the *munfatiḥīn*) to the author in the following terms:

> The Sadrist trend today is not what it was several years ago as, it has developed in constructing its consciousness and as a national project. It has left behind the chaotic emotionalism by which is was previously characterised, and today seeks an active participation in the construction of Iraq and its salvation. The Sadrists now have an open disposition towards all Iraq, and are the Islamist trend that is closest to the civil trend because the Sadrists are descended from the religious *marja'iyya* with greatest consciousness, that is al-Sayyid Muhammad Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr, the father of the leader of the Sadrist trend Muqtada al-Sadr. [Sadeq al-Sadr] was a man of genuine cultural (*muthaqafī*) awareness, he possessed a broad cultural knowledge in addition to his being a religious *marja'* and *faqīh* amongst the great Shiʿi *fuqahāʾ*.

This is a fascinating statement in several respects. It points to currents within the Sadr movement that are critical of its past orientations and behaviours, and perceive the movement as having undergone positive ideological transformation in recent years, culminating in the civil trend-Sadrist convergence. It also reveals the tension emerging between religious and other forms of legitimacy and authority within the movement. Baghdadi draws out a distinction between authority based on cultural (*muthaqafī*), as opposed to religious (*dīnī*), consciousness, claiming that what distinguished Sadeq al-Sadr, and elevated him above the status of a regular *marja',* was his broad *cultural* understanding over and above his strictly *religious* qualifications. In this way, Baghdadi anchors his own social practices, as a 'cultural activist' in the religious authority of Sadeq al-Sadr, without subordinating cultural activity generally to clerical hegemony. Rather, he seeks to relocate Sadeq al-Sadr as an actor who transcended the limits of the religious field, and thus provides a meta-structuring authority that can also sustain activity in non-religious domains.

In this sense Baghdadi's appeal to the authority of Sadeq al-Sadr, despite the latter being Ayatollah, is a means of escape from clerical hegemony in the present. Indeed, Baghdadi's normative characterisation of the Sadr movement is largely secular in its framing, and he presents his role within the movement as cooperating with intellectuals to deepen Sadrist investment in cultural, as opposed to religious, terrain, and thereby raise their consciousness:

> The Sadrist trend today is trying to be a national trend [*tayyar waṭanī*], fundamentally, far from religious-sectarian affiliations. This is why the movement is at odds with most of the Shiʿi religious parties and movements, because of this moderation it has adopted and calls for. Even our relationship with Iran has become somewhat disturbed and thrown into doubt. However, our biggest problem, as the Sadrist trend, is our lack of cultural and media institutions through which we can take our project to the outside world. I am part of a group of intellectuals [*muthaqafīn*] aiming to raise the consciousness of the Sadrists through cultural education.

This 'group' of intellectuals is not exclusively populated by Sadrists but includes a wider range of actors from outside the Sadrist movement (e.g. Saeb 'Abd al-Hami), and even secular-leftist actors outside Islamist currents altogether (e.g. Faris Kamal Nadhmi, Faleh 'Abd al-Jabar) who have joined in this cultural project. Thus, it can be seen how the scope of Baghdadi's social identity and cultural perspectives was broadened by this double identification as a Sadrist *and* an intellectual.

As well as playing a role in shaping the cultural and ideological orientation of the Sadr movement, Baghdadi's social ties to the civil trend enabled him to facilitate the civil trend-

Sadrist convergence by acting as a broker between the two movements. He outlined how this role functioned:

> From the beginning, I was trying hard to bring together the Sadrist trend with the civil trend in all its dimensions, and in this I succeeded to a great extent through my close relationships with the leaderships of these two parties. Later, the efforts that I had undertaken crystallised into systematic working mechanisms. Many meetings were held between the 'Central Supervising Committee for the Protests,'[56] formed by Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr, and many of the important characters in the civil movement.[57]

Baghdadi is likely overstating his unique centrality in facilitating secular/leftist-Sadrist interactions from 2015. However, the author's interviews and discussions with those involved in the coalition indicate that Baghdadi played a role in facilitating early meetings, providing lists of civil trend activists to more senior Sadrist (clerical) figures who lacked his particular network of ties, and participating in many of the early discussions between the two movements.

The way Baghdadi describes this role looks similar to the vision set out by Faris Nadhmi regarding the role of the 'traditional' (secular) intelligentsia in raising and shaping the political consciousness of the organic intellectual stratum of the masses.[58] In fact, Baghdadi was familiar with Nadhmi's intellectual work and the two developed an enduring friendship through their interactions in the civil trend-Sadrist convergence. However, Nadhmi's Marxist conceptual framework tends to obscure the structural distance between this Sadrist cultural stratum and the movement's social base. The two were not 'organically' linked, since, by participating in the secular intellectual field, Sadrist cultural activists gained a degree of structural autonomy within the Sadr movement. Consequently, their cultural and ideological orientations did not transfer to the bases of the movement in a straightforward and uncontested manner.

A further dynamic that should not be overlooked, therefore, is how the Sadrist base, its ordinary rank-and-file members, applied pressures on the Sadrist leadership in ways that exacerbated horizontal intra-elite conflicts within the movement. In the early phase of the

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[56] The Committee included: Dr Abd al-Jabbar al-Hidjami [head of media relations at Muqtada's Private Office), Shaykh Salah al-Obeidi [Muqtada's spokesman], Shaykh Sadeq al-Hasnawi, and Shaykh Mohammad al-Aboudi [members of Muqtada's shura council], and Baghdadi.

[57] The writer and journalist, Saadun Mohsen Thamad. The poet and journalist, Ahmad Abd al-Hussein. The poet and journalist Ali al-Sumeri The great screenwriter, Hamid al-Maliki. Professor Jassim Hilfi. The famous writer, Star Muhsin "Abu Bilal" owner of dar sator the printer and publisher and distributer. Civil activist Hamid Jhadjih, head of the institution 'Koun'. Civil activist Ammar al-Saadi, the founder of the group 'Enlightenment'. Civil activist, Abu Mohammad al-Muhammadawi. Civil activist Jalal al-Shahmaani, who disappeared at the beginning of the demonstrations and remains unaccounted for. Poet and civil activist, Adham Aadil.

[58] See chapter four.

protests, many ordinary Sadrists came out to join the demonstrations without any specific order from Muqtada encouraging them to do so.[59] A senior ICP activist described to the author how this placed pressure on Muqtada from below:

> When the protests started, the demands were for electricity and services and this affected the Sadrists too, perhaps more than others, so they came to the first protests. Muqtada al-Sadr thought that he had lost his base, or part of his base, and saw that we [the civil trend] were providing an alternative leadership, so he had to take a step.

However, these pressures also exacerbated factional conflicts within the movement's leadership strata, placing Muqtada in an inter-factional brokerage role. For instance, 'Alaa' al-Baghdadi took considerable risk by publishing an open letter to the movement urging it to support the protests:

> I called for the Sadrist masses to engage with force in the protests, but as a populist movement not a political party, and after the Sadrists had distanced themselves from the claws of the political class and their corruption. I was subjected at that time to a vicious attack by some Sadrist [leaders].

A senior ICP informant also discussed these intra-Sadrist splits from the perspective of those civil trend actors seeking to cooperate with the Islamist movement:

> As Muqtada al-Sadr later told us, if a group from the *madaniyyūn* within the civil trend were putting pressure on us, it was even more difficult for them. The pressure on the Sadrists from the Islamist currents and from the Iranian axis was greater, and there was pressure from inside [the Sadr movement] on Muqtada too. This came from personalities accused of corruption, since in any reform project they will be the first to be damaged. A number of displaced ministers and officials in the Sadr movement, surrounded by accusations of corruption, did not want cooperation with the civil trend and played a big role in distorting our image to Muqtada al-Sadr.[60]

This episode illustrates once more how weak horizontal linkages between the different leadership strata of the movement led to forms of intra-movement conflict. Muqtada's leadership role did not consist of simply directing his followers and imposing a strategic orientation on the movement from the top-down. Rather, he acted as a broker between competing leadership factions, and responded to bottom-up pressures created by the autonomous actions of the movement's base.

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[59] This has seldom been recognised as analyses tend to depict Muqtada as deploying his base strategically as if they were pawns in a chess game. For example, Jabar writes that 'Mass participation by the Sadrist movement in the protests in Baghdad followed Muqtada al-Sadr's instruction.' Jabar, 'The Iraqi Protest Movement,' 22.

[60] 'They said that we drink alcohol, that we are atheists, that we are advancing foreign agendas connected to the Americans, that we are taking money from foreign embassies many such falsehoods and lies.' ICP strategist (anonymous), interview by author, 2017.

Finally, it is important to consider a complicating factor with respect to the role of clerics in the Sadr movement and in the civil trend-Sadrist convergence. So far, the dimensions of intra-Sadrist social struggle have been described as coalescing, broadly speaking, around a clerical-lay activist divide. In this respect, the pattern mirrors that often seen in Islamist movements, particularly with regard to Sunni Islamists where the division between lay intellectuals and activists and clerical strata has been more pronounced.[61] However, in this case, there was an exception to this rule, i.e. a particular type of clerical actor who was closely aligned with Muqtada and the self-styled *munfatiḥīn*. This included most prominently: Shaykhs Saleh al-Obeidi, Sadeq al-Hasnawi, Muhammad al-Aboudi and Karim al-Manfi. What was it about these actors that made them distinct in their orientation from their clerical counterparts within the Sadr trend such as Shaykh Usama al-Musawi?

Two possible arguments can be made by way of explanation. First, the older generation of Sadrist clerics was distinguished by its greater sociological proximity to secular-leftist intellectual currents in Iraq. Olivier Roy has identified this factor as making Shiʿi Islamist movements in general more leftist in orientation. [62] Second, there is a distinction in routine practices at play, i.e. all the clerics identified above are outliers from normative clerical practice in the sense that their routine social functions were as advisors and leaders of the Sadr movement in close proximity to Muqtada. As such, they were not primarily engaged in the routine practices of the religious field (management of the goods of salvation) but operated – like Muqtada himself – across multiple social contexts acting more as brokers between the movement's various factions. Consequently, they possessed more complex configurations of social capital reflecting a more diverse trajectory of socialisation, and also a greater degree of autonomy from the normative social logics of particular fields.

These distinctions can be illuminated by interviews the author conducted with actors in the civil trend who sought to build cooperation with the Sadr movement and so developed a perspective on the latter's internal cleavages. For example, one senior ICP operative expressed their surprise at what they saw as the extremely positive role played by a limited number of clerical leaders who were close to Muqtada:

> There is a section amongst the [clerical] leadership who believe that reform is a religious and national duty, a humane duty, and they are very convinced by Muqtada al-Sadr and say that 'Muqtada al-Sadr precedes us in analysis by around a year or two years.' I only came to recognise this due to friendships that emerged between us, not just with

[61] See chapter two.
[62] Oliver Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 174-175.

> Muqtada al-Sadr but with several leaders amongst those to close him. These people could obtain benefits [from the system], be members of parliament or ministers, but they distance themselves from worldly things such as positions of political power. I mean, they have a sort of satisfaction with a Sufi religious asceticism, they are genuine revolutionaries and they want genuine reform. To be frank, I was shocked by the positions and actions of some of these people, such as [Shaykh] Salah al-Obeidi, for he was truly convinced by the words [of Muqtada regarding the reform project].[63]

Thus, clerics like Salah al-Obeidi, while having come through the traditional *hawza* system, are somewhat distanced from the routine relations of the religious field. Rather, they inhabit a quite distinct and narrow social space constituted by Muqtada's inner circle of advisors and respected leaders within the movement. Their status is predicated partly on their social capital derived from the religious field, but primarily on their intimate proximity to Muqtada. This gives them a greater degree of autonomy from the social logics of religious field-based competition, as it does from professional politics.

Another illustrative case is that of Shaykh Sadeq al-Hasnawi, who was pivotal in many meetings between the civil trend/ICP and the Sadr movement. Shaykh Hasnawi is a senior member of Muqtada's shura council and amongst the older generation of clerics whose social trajectories were impacted by the secular-leftist cultural milieu that grew in Iraq from the mid-20th century.[64] When discussing his background, Shaykh Hawsnawi told the author:

> In truth, I grew up in Islam, my father was a member of the Islamic Movement of Iraq (al-Haraka al-Islamiyya*)*, arrested in 1981 then sentenced to death and executed in 1982. I did not belong to any political organization, but I read almost all the literature of the revolutionary movements, both Islamist and non-Islamist. If I had not been an Islamist, I would have been a religious leftist. The 1980s were the time of the Iran–Iraq war and terrible internal repression. Islamic books were banned, so we read and circulated them in secret. The religious institutions were silent and quiescent in the face of repression and horrors experienced by the people. This prompted me to engage with the leftists, to understand the means of revolutionary organization. I was impressed by Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, ʿAbd al-Karim Qasim, Jamal ʿAbd al-Nasir, Ibrahim al-Hamdi in Yemen, and Dr Mosaddegh in Iran.

This ideological cross-pollination of Shiʿi Islamism and leftist politics was not an inherent feature of Shiʿi Islamism or the Sadr movement but a contingent feature of particular historical conditions.

This older generation of Sadr movement clerics, like Shaykh Hasnawi, were socialised within a social context in Iraq that was heavily influenced by leftist ideological currents and interpenetration between intellectual and clerical spheres. Consequently, they possessed

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[63] Senior ICP strategist (anonymous), interview by author, 2017.
[64] Shaykh Sadeq al-Hasnawi, interview by author via electronic communication, September 5, 2017.

forms of social and cultural capital that facilitated cross-movement interaction with the civil trend. As Shaykh Hasnawi went on to state:

> Later, I was influenced by the ideas of the martyr Sayyid Muhammed Baqir al-Sadr after I read his books, foremost of which was *Iqtisaduna* [Our Economics] from which I learned about Marxism as a philosophy and a method of interpreting history… This perspective helped me later in the dialogue and flexible rapprochement with the civil trend.

By contrast, the younger generation of Sadrist clerics, such as Shaykh Qais al-Khaza'li, came of age in the 1990s, and were less enmeshed in these intellectual and ideological trends. They were more oriented towards the strictly religious-messianic currents of the Sadr II movement which was more fundamentally anchored in the religious field than previous iterations of Shiʿi Islamism in Iraq. These are two distinct trajectories of socialisation, imparting different configurations of social capital, and cultural and political perspectives.

## IV
## The 2015 Protest Movement and the Civil Trend-Sadrist Convergence

So far, this chapter has explored two dimensions of change that converged in 2015 – social crises and transverse movement cleavages – and how these intersected to reconfigure the strategic calculations of movement actors involved in the civil trend-Sadrist convergence. Some of these dynamics also pointed to changes that were rooted in slower moving processes of socialisation that gave rise to forms of social action not as conscious calculation but emerging from alterations in actors' dispositions and more deep-seated identities and perspectives. It is primarily here that the threads of socio-structural transformations in the two movements, outlined in previous chapters, feed into the phenomenon of convergence as it unfolded from 2015.

These two modes of social action have important implications for coalition politics, since, *ceteris paribus*, where strategic calculation is reinforced by deeper socio-cultural structures it allows for forms of cooperation that are both broader in scope and more enduring and resilient in the face of external challenges. This section, therefore, reveals how these transformations and features of the civil trend and the Sadr movements allowed for cross-movement relationships that went beyond merely tactical calculation to a much deeper set of interactions. It concludes by drawing out a comparison between the Sadr movement and another Shiʿi Islamist group, 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, who also tried to integrate into the protest

movement but ultimately failed where the Sadrists succeeded. What explains these divergent outcomes is partly the degree of socio-cultural embeddedness that existed between the civil trend and the Sadr movement by 2015 but did not vis-à-vis ‘Asa’ib.

### *Interactions Through the Protest Movement*

During an interview with Jassim al-Helfi in the summer of 2017, the author asked the ICP activist most directly responsible for the civil trend-Sadrist convergence how it came about. His response homed in on the centrality of the 2015 protests: ‘The first step, and it was the most important, was the protest movement. This was the door that opened up the possibility of convergence, and we did not find another.’[65] The importance of the protests lay in their symbolic capital which became a valued resource for the Sadr movement as it sought to revivify its own legitimacy, to distance itself from the political power structure (at least rhetorically) and invest the movement more heavily where it enjoyed a comparative advantage vis-à-vis its rapidly expanding rivals in the field of violence. The civil trend leadership positioned itself as brokers between the protests and the Sadr movement, gatekeepers who would allow symbolic legitimation to flow in one direction in exchange for access to a larger political framework through cooperation with the Sadrists.

Consequently, the initial interactions between the two sides were highly tactical, cautious and fraught with suspicion. The first exploratory meeting between civil trend and Sadrist representatives occurred three weeks after the initial protest in Tahrir Square. The meeting was scheduled to take place at the home of Sattar Mohsen ʿAli, head of the Baghdad-based Dar Sotour publishing house. However, the venue was changed at the last minute, and the meeting was eventually convened at the home of Hassan Hadi Zabun. Zabun is another civil trend actor with an unusual social background, being a former Sadrist who migrated intellectually towards a secularist outlook. Zabun was, therefore, well placed to act as an interlocutor during this initial meeting.

Attending this first meeting from the civil trend were Sattar Mohsen ʿAli, ʿAmar al-Sa’adi, Fadhil ʿAbas, and Jassim al-Helfi. The Sadrist delegation was headed by Shaykh Hasnawi and Shaykh Karim al-Manfi. This initial encounter produced little in terms of tangible results.

[65] Jassim al-Helfi, interview by author, Erbi, Iraq, August 6, 2017.

In an interview with the author, Zabun explained their reluctance to engage with the Sadrists:[66]

> The Sadrists are partners in political power. Many of them are thought to be involved in corruption, so how can they protest against corruption? The Sadrists also have a different vision, there were doubts about their acceptance of the principles of the civil trend such as their position on unveiled women, personal freedoms such as drinking alcohol, singing and theatre. Finally, there were worries that they would appropriate Tahrir Square and confiscate leadership of the protests.

Helfi led a break-away group from within the civil trend that sought to pursue cooperation with the Sadr movement. However, like Zabun, he recognised that their initial interactions were cautious and limited to tactical and pragmatic aspects of their coordination in the protests:

> In the beginning, we talked only to define the demands of the protests and the methods of the protest movement. Our demands were services, fighting corruption and the theft of public funds, and our methods were peaceful protest only and nothing else. In the beginning we were apprehensive about Muqtada al-Sadr and the Sadrist trend because it was, in our minds, a movement with a radical and extremist militia, so how can we find a foundation for meeting and mutual understanding with this movement. So, we drew closer with caution.

Nevertheless, those elements of the civil trend who pursued cooperation with the Sadr movement were drawn into an ad hoc organisational structure of joint committees that dealt primarily with these tactical and pragmatic aspects of the protest movement.

The central organisational structure was the Committee for the Supervision of the Protests which was created by the civil trend and the Sadrists to coordinate their joint participation in the protests. ʿAbd al-Husayn and Helfi were given places on this committee alongside key Sadrist figures: Shaykh Sadeq al-Hasnawi, ʿAbd al-Jabar al-Hidjami, Shaykh Salah al-Ubaydi, and Shaykh Aboudi, and ‘Alaa’ al-Baghdadi. A second body, the Coordinating Sub-Committee*,* was established later under the leadership of a young Sadrist named Hassan al-Kaʿbi. This body was responsible for the day-to-day coordination of civil trend–Sadrist activity. It was tasked with drawing wider elements of the civil trend into the cooperation. ‘Abd al-Hussein and Helfi were also on this committee, along with a range of other civil trend activists. [67]

In taking these positions, ‘Abd al-Hussein and Helfi cemented their roles as leaders of the civil trend as far as the Sadr movement was concerned*.* It was principally through them

[66] Hadi Hassan Zabun, interview by author via electronic communication, September 24, 2017.
[67] Hassan al-Ka’bi, discussions with the author via electronic communication, October 22, 2017.

that key strategic decisions between the two movements would be brokered. These relationships functioned, as with intra-Sadrist dynamics, primarily through their personal ties to Muqtada, and not through the committees. Nevertheless, the committees themselves, initially organised around pragmatic aspects of protest coordination, also engaged members of both movements in forms of routine cooperation that eventually developed into more enduring relationships, and even friendships.

*Figure 9 Hassan al-Ka'bi (left); Jassim al-Helfi (centre); and Ahmad 'Abd al-Hussein (right). During protest in Baghdad, December 28, 2018. Images provided to the author by Jassim al-Helfi and Ahmad 'Abd al-Hussein.*

*Figure 10 Members of the civil trend-Sadrist protest organisation committee at Sadrist offices in Baghdad, May 26, 2018. Images provided to the author by Jassim al-Helfi and Ahmad 'Abd al-Hussein.*

*Figure 11 Ahmad 'Abd al-Hussein with Muqtada al-Sadr following a meeting in Najaf in 2016. Images provided to the author by Ahmad 'Abd al-Hussein.*

*Figure 12 Ahmad 'Abd al-Hussein (left); Shaykh Sadeq al-Hasnawi (centre); and Jassim al-Helfi (right),* during protest in Tahrir Square, March 4, 2016. *Images provided to the author by Jassim al-Helfi and Ahmad 'Abd al-Hussein.*

Tactical cooperation in the protests was thus the door that opened up more wide-ranging and ambitious forms of cooperation. It was not just that trust emerged over time via routine interactions over pragmatic issues. Rather, creating a space for certain strata of the two movements to engage in creative and novel forms of cooperation uncovered preexisting commonalities and shared cultural and political perspectives. These frequently, but not always, reflected transformations in the two movements that had been ongoing particularly since 2009. A genuine and passionately held belief emerged regarding the authenticity and commitment of cross-movement interlocutors. Faris Nadhmi described this as a 'unique psychological experience entailing an important adjustment to the frozen mental image which each side holds of the other.'[68] Helfi came to believe that Muqtada, and other Sadrist leaders, were fully committed to the reform project, even telling the author: 'Muqtada al-Sadr looked on the idea that Dr Faris had written about [the historical bloc], and he had an epiphany.'[69]

The social terrain of the protests also opened up new forms of cross-movement interaction that were not limited to this narrow range of elites. Muqtada had issued orders that Sadrists participating in the protests would not display the religious or Sadr-centric

[68] Faris Kamal Nadhmi, 'al-Taqarub al-Madani–al-Sadri fi Sahat al-Ihtijaj,' *al-Hiwar al-Mutamaddin*, July 18, 2016. http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=524705
[69] Jassim al-Helfi, interview by author, Erbi, Iraq, August 6, 2017.

images previously typical of the movement's mobilisations. Instead, they would adopt strictly secular-nationalist symbols of the civil trend in their clothing, chants and other symbolic gestures. These orders were, by and large, adhered to, enmeshing ordinary Sadrists in social practices that appeared to create new modes of Sadrist political subjects that made distinct claims vis-à-vis political authority and legitimacy. These did not displace Muqtada's messianic religious authority but were layered on top and co-existed in an unresolved tension.[70]

The protests also became a space for cross-movement cultural interactions. For instance, many artists and cultural figures used the March 2016 sit-in protest, which the two groups held outside the gates of the Green Zone, to experiment with engaging ordinary Sadrists in forms of cultural dialogue. This included painting, poetry readings and other cultural activities. As outlined above, the sit-in protest also saw the creation of an ad hoc newspaper, The National Sit-In Paper. This project was initiated by the Sadrist 'Alaa' al-Bagdhadi but was designed as a cross-movement endeavour giving a voice to Sadrist and civil trend journalists and intellectuals to comment on the joint protests and their significance. The effects of such cultural interactions are less tangible than concrete political outcomes. Nevertheless, they indicated the willingness, even enthusiasm, of actors in certain strata of the civil trend and Sadr movement to initiate and pursue forms of cultural interaction that were not primarily strategic, or even political, but oriented towards finding common identities and modes of expression that might later transfer into political action.

[70] For a full discussion of these tensions between Sadrist performance in political public space and the movement's structures of authority and relations of power, see, Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, 'Sadrists in the Public Sphere: An Ethnography of Political Shiʿism in Iraq,' *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 145 (September 2019): 75-96.

*Figure 13 March 2016, sit-in protest outside the gates of the Green Zone. Iraqi artists pain and display their work. Images provided to the author by Faris Kamal Nadhmi.*

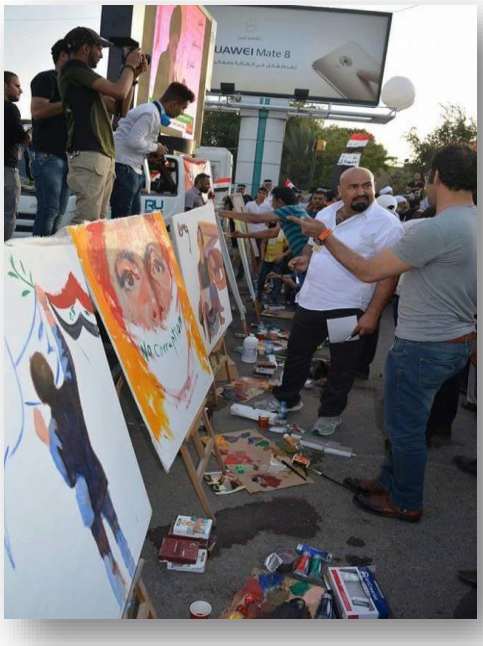


*Figure 14 Digital copy of join Sadrist-civil trend 'The National Sit-In' newspaper that was distributed during the sit-in protests in March 2016. Images provided to the author by editor Alaa al-Baghdadi.*


الاعتصام الوطني

تعليمات إلى المعتصمين


إلى الخائفين من الاعتصام

مع التغيير والاصلاح المستمر

مشروعية التظاهر والاعتصام والعصيان المدني

مغارة الخضراء

البعث سيشترك في الاعتصام!

على هامش الاعتصام

دعونا نأباهضا

### *Interactions on the Social Terrain of the Intellectual Field*

The importance of this cultural dimension to the civil trend-Sadrist convergence is also explained by the primary social terrain on which the two movements negotiated, i.e. that of the civil trend and the secular intellectual field which mediated between the protests and the Sadr movement. Contra a merely political brokerage via formal political channels, the social terrain of the civil trend required that political action be modulated through its particular heuristic frameworks, cultural technologies and symbolic modes. Thus, the cross-movement interactions outlined below occurred in the key social settings and forms of practice of the intellectual field. The Sadr movement's cultural turn from 2009 left it better equipped to engage in these practices and helps to explain the Sadrists' success in bridging this divide where other Islamist groups failed.[71]

For example, one key meeting took place in September 2015, several months after the start of the protests, and involved a dinner between the two sides at Hilfi's house, 'Alaa' al-Baghdadi was one of the attendees for the Sadr movement, and discussed their nature with the author in the following terms:

> Myself, Shaykh Sadeq al-Hasnawi, and Shaykh Muhammad al-Abudi went to Jassim al-Hilfi's house where Jassim greeted us warmly. Some of the civil trend activists had arrived before us, the most prominent of whom was ʿAmmar al-Saʾdi, the founder of the group 'Enlightenment.' Later, we were joined by ʿAbd al-Husayn. We discussed many issues connected with the popular movement before dinner. After dinner, we went into the garden to drink tea and began a dialogue on culture, art and literature that ended with a discussion of the role of the intellectual and its importance in the popular movement.

Thus, the initial tactical and pragmatic interactions very quickly gave way to a deeper cultural dialogue that opened up the possibility for broader forms of strategic cooperation. As Baghdadi stated:

> Most of these meetings … were not characterised by detailed discussions of the procedural details of the popular protests but were expressed through general cultural dialogues that started with Voltaire, Sartre, Herman Hesse, Marquez, Albert Camus, and ended with Nietzsche, Spinoza, and Gramsci's concept of the "historical bloc" … and the renewal project of Muhammad Arkoun.

Such private meetings were also accompanied by public interactions. For instance, Shaykh Hasnawi, Shaykh Abudi, Dr ʿAbd al-Jabar al-Hidjami, and Baghdadi went Mutanabbi Street and al-Qishla Gardens and talked directly to intellectuals and civil trend activists in a public

[71] See chapter four.

meeting: 'It was a very important precedent, having some of the leaders of the Sadrist trend in Mutanabbi Street, listening to all manner of questions and trying to respond with clarity in a flexible and quiet way that left very positive impressions for all,' Baghdadi recalled.

Intellectuals also played a crucial role in the convergence. The two most significant cases were the high-profile Iraqi sociologist Faleh 'Abd al-Jabar, and Iraqi social psychologist Faris Kamal Nadhmi. Before his sudden death in February 2018, 'Abd al-Jabar emerged as one of the most prominent secular intellectual voices supporting the civil trend-Sadrist convergence. Renad Mansour, a close friend of the Iraqi academic who saw his engagement with the Sadrists firsthand, wrote that 'Abd al-Jabar 'helped to provide Sadr with a theoretical understanding of the concept of technocracy in order to ensure that Sadr's political movement was compatible with democracy and the political process in Iraq.'[72] Mansour also told the author:

> From 2015 onward Faleh began meeting with Sadrists and other Iraqi officials in creating this strange alliance. I worked with him during these years and recall the first phone call that came from Najaf with senior Sadrist officials wanting to meet him. They had read his work and seemed to be fans. Through the years, Faleh would become one of the main thinkers in shaping the alliance, and what he would refer to as the new, more nationalist Islamism in Iraq. He very much viewed this alliance as the next step to moving past the oft-stated supposed binary between secularists and Islamists. More critically, Faleh believe that the Communist Party and other aspects of the civil trend had failed to mobilise effectively since 2003. And as such, he thought working with the Sadrists, who had the same anti-*muḥāṣaṣa* and anti-corruption mandate, could be a way forward.[73]

'Abd al-Jabar's final contribution to Iraqi public life was a strong statement in support of the Sadrist convergence in which he addressed concerns about Muqtada's intentions vis-à-vis the protest movement and the civil trend:

> The polarisation within the Shiʿi Islamist forces is what will decide the future of the country… there is a 'rightist' Shiʿi Islamist bloc that works to rule by sectarian majority, and govern by an iron, Islamic fist… [and] there is a centrist bloc that opposes the right fundamentally [the Sadrists]. I think there is a duty to work with the blocs supporting the centrist orientation for the rightist orientation is Islamist fascism.[74]

'Abd al-Jabar played a dual role, therefore, seeking to guide and influence the political development of the Sadr movement through dialogue with its leaders, but in trying to

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[72] Renad Mansour, 'The Legacy of Faleh 'Abd al-Jabar,' *LSE Middle East Centre,* June 2, 2018. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/06/02/the-legacy-of-faleh-abdul-jabar/

[73] Renad Mansour, interview by author, London, September 20, 2019. Unfortunately, Faleh 'Abd al-Jabar died before the author had the opportunity to interview him about his role in the civil trend-Sadrist convergence.

[74] Edited exert from Faleh Jabar statement on social media, 18 February 2018.

convince a profoundly sceptical Iraqi intelligentsia that the Sadr movement was not a threat but a potential partner in political reform.

Faris Nadhmi, meanwhile, had a longer history of interactions with the Sadr movement dating back to 2009-2010.[75] Through these interactions he increased his social standing and profile within the Sadr movement, particularly its emerging cultural activist strata. When the civil trend-Sadrist convergence began in 2015, Nadhmi's profile grew further, particularly as parts of the civil trend reoriented towards his ideological perspective. Thenceforth, he was increasingly invited to give talks on civil trend-Sadrist cooperation in secular locales. The launch of his 2017 book was attended by many young Sadrists who were keen to have their copies signed and have their photos taken with Nadhmi, later sharing these on their social media platforms for a Sadrist audience.[76] The ideas of his 2010 article calling for the formation of a new historical bloc between the Iraqi left and the Sadr movement became an important ideological component underpinning civil trend–Sadrist cooperation.

An example of the above was Dhia al-Asadi, one of the Sadr movement's most prominent political and intellectual figures, who stated during a symposium in Erbil on 11 April 2017 that the strategy of Gramsci's historical bloc was the core of Muqtada's political project.[77] Jassim al-Hilfi, the most prominent ICP figure promoting cooperation with the Sadrists, also cited Nadhmi's article as a major influence.[78] Nadhmi was also integrated into the emerging institutional dimension of civil trend–Sadrist cooperation. In February 2016 Muqtada appointed him to his 'independent' committee tasked with formulating recommendations for technocratic ministerial appointments.[79] A merely tactical political accommodation, or strategic bargain, is not likely to require, or create, prominent roles for intellectuals and cultural practices of the sort exemplified here by Faleh 'Abd al-Jabar and Faris Kamal Nadhmi.

[75] See chapter four.
[76] Faris Kamal Nadhmi. *Sikulujiya al-Ihtijaj fi-al-'Iraq* (Baghdad: Dar Sutour, 2017).
[77] 'al-Intikhabat al-Muqbila wa Hadud al-Taghiyr,' *al-Mada*, April 11, 2017.
[78] Jassim al-Helfi, interview by author, Erbi, Iraq, August 6, 2017.
[79] The committee included other prominent leftist academic figures such Faleh A. Jabar, Amer H. Fayadh, and several liberal intellectuals, such as Haider Saeed and Senan al-Shebebi.

*Figure 15 Faris Kamal Nadhmi and Dhia al-Asadi participate in a symposium at Erbil International Cultural Festival April 11, 2017. Image provided to the author by Faris Kamal Nadhmi.*

*Figure 16 Faris Nadhmi with civil trend and Sadr movement activists at Ridha Alwan Café for launch of his book The Psychology of Protest in Iraq. Image provided to the author by Faris Kamal Nadhmi.*

### *'Asa'ib Enter the Game*

What rendered the Sadrists uniquely capable – compared with other Islamist forces – of convergence with the civil trend was partly this higher degree of social integration with Iraq's secular intellectual field and the civil trend. However, its strong vertical linkages into the movement's social base were also a strategic asset in this context, giving the Sadrists greater mobilising capacity which the civil trend lacked. To further clarify this dynamic, it is helpful to compare the Sadr movement's interactions with the civil trend with those of another Shiʿi Islamist group, 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (The League of the Righteous) which also sought to interact with and exploit the protest movement in 2015 but with markedly different results.

'Asa'ib shared ideological territory with the Sadr movement from whom the group splintered in 2006.[80] The group's leader, Shaykh Qais al-Khaza'li, was a prominent pupil of Sadeq al-Sadr and emerged as one of Muqtada's closest advisors post-2003. Khaza'li today claims to be the true inheritor of Sadeq al-Sadr's legacy, situating 'Asa'ib within the broader constellation of Sadrist trend. However, Khaza'li's group developed primarily as a paramilitary network within the field of violence, and its localisation in this field meant greater integration into, and dependence on, Iran's IRGC network in Iraq. In breaking from the Sadr movement, 'Asa'ib also lost access to the OMS network through which the former integrates itself into local communities. Meanwhile, its greater dependence on external patronage gave the group less ideological flexibility, and reduced incentives to build linkages into broader elements of Iraqi society. Consequently, when compared with the Sadr movement, 'Asa'ib was less socially embedded along the two axes (horizontal and vertical) previously outlined. This dynamic helps explain the distinct development of 'Asa'ib's strategy vis-à-vis the protest movement in 2015.

'Asa'ib sought to involve itself in the protest movement almost immediately after the first demonstration in Baghdad at the end of July, i.e. before Muqtada had officially thrown his movement into the streets. Trying to exploit the protests' symbolic resources, 'Asa'ib launched the 'Civil Mobilisation' (al-Hashd al-Madani), a branding tool associating their participation in the Popular Mobilisation (al-Ḥashd al-Sha'bi) of paramilitaries against Islamic State with the symbolic legitimacy of the protest movement.[81] Images of the

[80] See chapter three notes for discussion of controversy surrounding the precise time and nature of 'Asa'ib's split form the Sadr movement.
[81] Exploiting the linguistic ambiguity surrounding the term *madanī* and playing up its civil versus military distinction, as opposed to secular versus religious.

demonstrations also became a regular feature on their TV station, al-'Ahd (The Covenant). The group's initial strategy was not to displace the civil trend from Tahrir Square, but an attempt to instrumentalise the symbolic capital of the protests to promote their own political brand. As with the Sadr movement, this required building a cooperative relationship with the civil trend that would maintain their participation in the protests. However, while the two sides attempted through secret negotiations to reach an understanding on the basis for cooperation, these efforts quickly unravelled.

The immediate obstacle to 'Asa'ib's strategy was the deep suspicion and lack of trust between the two sides. 'Abd al-Hussein recalled the sentiment among civil trend activists towards the news that 'Asa'ib had announced its intention to participate in the next protest following the outbreak of demonstrations in July 2015:

> It was natural that we would be wary of 'Asa'ib's desire to demonstrate in Tahrir square since they are an armed element close to Maliki, the archenemy of the protesters. Most of us were among those who participated in the protests in February 2011, which Maliki supressed, and we were all friends of the martyr, Hadi al-Mahdi.[82] Furthermore, 'Asa'ib clearly receives Iranian funding and will not show much sympathy towards a small group of secularists who found themselves in the role of mobilizing the street.

Shortly after 'Asa'ib announced their intention to join the demonstrations, civil trend activists met to discuss their response.[83] The meeting was held in the office of 'Ali al-Khalidi in the Kerrada district of Baghdad and was attended by ten civil trend leaders.[84] They agreed that 'Asa'ib's decision to join the demonstrations was an attempt by Maliki to fragment and erode the movement's momentum. However, they were divided over how to best to respond to this strategy. Lengthy discussions resulted in a vote on two options: to persist in the protest as a distinct entity despite 'Asa'ib's presence; or to postpone the protest altogether. This was to no avail, however, as the outcome of the vote split the activists down the middle.[85] They understood the weakness of their position, if 'Asa'ib, or any other armed faction, inserted itself into the protests, they had no effective means to resist, nor to retain control over the movement.

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[82] Assassinated by suspected Maliki loyalists in his home in 2011. See chapter four.
[83] The account of meetings between the civil trend and 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq are based on written discussions of these events provided to the author by Ahmad Abd al-Hussein in August 2018.
[84] Nabil Jassim; Mustafa Sa'adoun; 'Ali Wajih; 'Ali al-Sumeri; Jihad Jalil; Baha Kamil; Mo'ayd al-Tayeb; 'Ai al-Khalidi; Ahmad 'Abd al-Hussein; Zaid al-Ajili.
[85] 'Abd Al-Hussein, 'Ali al-Sumeri, Jihad Jalil, Baha Kamil, and Mo'ayad al-Tayeb supported the idea of not leaving the square under any circumstances; Nabil Jassim, 'Ali al-Khalidi, Zaid al-Ajili, Mustafa Sa'adoun, and 'Ali Wajih supported postponing the demonstration.

In fact, the activists had misjudged ‘Asa’ib’s strategy which, initially, was not to displace the civil trend but to instrumentalise the protest movement and tap into its symbolic resources. This required the activists’ continued participation. Even as the activists discussed their next move, an invitation arrived from a leading figure in ‘Asa’ib inviting them to a meeting at the group’s headquarters in al-Jadriya, Baghdad. The activists agreed to meet with ‘Asa’ib and presented them with a list of conditions designed to prevent the group from exploiting the protests, while neutralizing them as a physical threat. These conditions prohibited weapons and wearing clothes, singing chants, or holding signs that could be identified as sectarian or associated with a particular political group.

The secret meeting took place the following day at ‘Asa’ib’s offices. ‘Abd al-Hussein and Nabil Jassim spoke for the civil trend delegation. ‘Abd al-Hussein recalled the ensuing discussion which revealed ‘Asa’ib’s strategy of symbolic association with the protests. This was exemplified by the group’s desire to associate their branding of *‘*al-Hashdal-Madani*’* with the protests:

> The meeting went on for more than two hours and addressed ‘Asa’ib’s relationship with Maliki and our concerns about this. We made clear that we were not bound by Maliki’s orders, or anyone else’s. We then put forward our conditions and were surprised that they agreed on all points (which they welcomed), something which I still find shocking. They asked for one exception, the raising of a sign on which would be written a slogan demanding reform but signed in the name of *‘*al-Hashd al-Madani.’ This we refused, and after a short discussion they abandoned the idea as well. The view of my colleagues changed after this meeting, which went smoothly, contrary to our expectations. We thought that the scenario for the coming protest would not differ from previous demonstrations, nobody would be able to distinguish ‘Asa’ib from the rest by their clothes, slogans or chants.

There was a powerful strategic rationale for the civil trend to accept ‘Asa’ib’s participation under these conditions, namely the neutralization of a potentially hostile armed threat against which they had no other obvious recourse.

Despite this tentative agreement between the two sides, subsequent events illustrated that a shared basis for cooperation had not been established. It is not clear whether ‘Asa’ib always intended to renege on their agreement with the civil trend activists, or if there was a degree of strategic confusion or loss of control of activists on the ground. In any event, when the next round of Friday protests arrived the assurances provided by ‘Asa’ib vis-à-vis the activists’ demands were not upheld. The following eyewitness account given to the author[86] of the following Friday protests clarifies the extent to which ‘Asa’ib’s activists

[86] This account draws on the author’s translation of ‘Alaa’ al-Baghdadi’s unpublished memoires.

sought to impose themselves by occupying the physical and symbolic spaces of the protests in Tahrir Square:

> A large electronic message board had been erected close to the Turkish restaurant [at the edge of Tahrir square] which displayed an advert funded by Shaykh Qais al-Khaza'li. The display discussed some of the positions adopted by his movement… In another corner of Tahrir square there was a group of young people raising signs displaying slogans which contradicted the demands of the protesters on the previous Friday, and they were stamped with the signature of 'al-Hashd al-Madani'. We heard that a fight had taken place because of the insistence of 'Asa'ib cadres on keeping the main platform for themselves. This resulted in the beating of [civil trend] activists with sticks and knives, the most prominent of whom, Hamid Jadjih, was transferred to the hospital.

'Asa'ib's actions caused the civil trend to withdraw en masse, leaving the Islamists in control of the central platform in front of the Ḥurriya (Freedom) Mural.[87]

This was a pyrrhic victory for 'Asa'ib, since without the civil trend's presence it was a social domain emptied of its symbolic value. Moreover, by intimidating civil trend activists, 'Asa'ib made sure that the need for protection via alliance with a counter-balancing group would be a strategic priority for those determined to persist in the protests. They would turn to 'Asa'ib fiercest rival within the Shiʿi Islamist camp, the Sadr movement, to provide this function. In fact, this relationship eventually became explicit when, following a series of attacks on ICP targets in which 'Asa'ib was suspected of involvement, Muqtada announced that he would take responsibility for protecting the civil trend from other non-state actors. Remarkably, the Sadr movement had effectively become the paramilitary wing of the Iraqi secular intelligentsia.[88]

## V
## Conclusion

This chapter sought to unpack the civil trend-Sadrist convergence via the 2015 reform protest movement. It has argued that the leftist-Sadrist political alliance formed in 2018 was built on a substrate of deeper interactions between the civil trend and the Sadr movement that were mediated via the social terrain of the 2015 protests and the secular intellectual field. This social terrain shaped a cultural dimension to civil trend-Sadrist interactions from which broader forms of strategic political cooperation followed. These interactions were also

[87] Rasha Al-Tameemi provides a more detailed discussion of Tahrir Square as public political space, and the Freedom Monument at its heart, in Rasha Al-Tameemi, 'Analyzing Al-Tahrir Square as a Public-Political Space in Iraq,' University of Cincinnati (2017).
[88] Muqtada al-Sadr, May 21, 2017, press conference. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WMb3pDwC1UM.

structured by the interaction of broader social crises and transverse movement cleavages that opened up new strategic and tactical opportunities and incentives for movement actors. However, longer-term processes of socialisation and their effects in shifting actors' social networks and their political perspectives underlay and reinforced these strategic calculations.

Of crucial importance in explaining the convergence were dimensions of social embeddedness constituted by horizontal linkages between the civil trend and certain strata of the Sadr movement. A key argument of this thesis is that these horizontal linkages were not an extant feature of the two movements, but something that had to be created. Thus, the threads of social processes outlined in previous chapters find their way into the story of convergence from 2015. Of particular importance were the Sadr movement's cultural turn in 2009, and, emerging from this, a transgressive strain within the secular intelligentsia that began to build the ideological and social foundations for alliance with the Sadr movement as far back as 2010. These processes eventually bore fruit, but only within a particular context of social crisis and exacerbated transverse movement cleavages that converged in 2014-2015.

# CHAPTER SIX

# THE LEFTIST-SADRIST ALLIANCE FROM SOCIAL MOVEMENT COALITION TO ELECTORAL VICTORY (2015-2018)

> In the beginning we were apprehensive about Muqtada al-Sadr and the Sadrist trend. In our minds they were a movement with a radical and extremist militia, so how can we possibly find mutual understanding? [However,] the truth is that we gained a lot [from the alliance]. Today, the civil trend has become one of the most important political players in Iraq… But we cannot sustain this role without cooperation with the Sadrist trend.
>
> – Jassim al-Helfi, ICP Central Committee and Politburo member. Interview with author conducted in Iraq, 6 August 2017.

> How can we change the balance of forces if we do not penetrate the system? We must, therefore, penetrate the system in order to break the system. This system is built on Sunni, Shiʿa and Kurd, but the Shiʿi alliance is the strongest, and is constituted by the Sadrists, al-Daʿwa and the Supreme Council. Al-Daʿwa cannot join us, and nor can the Supreme Council. So, we search for a framework, for possibilities of joining with the Sadrists. If we can join the Sadrists to us, and thereby weaken the Shiʿi alliance and render it unstable, then if the Shiʿi alliance is weak, the system as a whole will be shaken.
>
> – Senior ICP political strategist, 2017, interview with author on condition of anonymity.

## I
## Introduction

The victory of the Shiʿi Islamist Sadrist movement in Iraq's May 2018 parliamentary elections stunned the Iraqi political establishment and outside observers alike.[1] More surprising still, this victory was achieved through an electoral alliance with the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) who thereby appeared to put themselves back at the heart of Iraqi

[1] Kirk H. Sowell: 'Initial results from Iraq's May 12 parliamentary elections, in which a coalition backed by Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr came in first place, sent a shockwave through the establishment and reset expectations regarding the formation of the next government.' Kirk H Sowell, 'Understanding Sadr's Victory,' The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 17, 2018. http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/76387

politics after years in the wilderness. Despite the Sadrists' leading role, Sairoun's political platform largely reflected the secular-liberal orientation of the ICP, eschewing previously dominant forms of identity-based politics and Shiʿi Islamist and Sadrist symbols and ideology.[2] Muqtada's new political rhetoric critiqued the entire edifice of political Islamism in Iraq. Thus, he stated during a television interview prior to the 2018 elections: 'I'll say this despite the *'amāma* [turban] on my head, we tried the Islamists and they failed miserably, it's time to try independent technocrats.'[3] The launch of Sairoun in January 2018 took place under a banner reading 'For building a civil state [*al-dawla al-madaniyya*]…a state of citizenship [*dawlat al-muwāṭana*] and social justice.'[4]

This appeared to signal a radical transformation for an Islamist movement previously known for its messianic religiosity, sectarian violence and puritanical social conservatism. However, it was also a remarkable strategic pivot for the Iraqi left who had, until after the 2014 elections, been seeking to unite Iraqi leftist and liberal forces behind a strictly secular political platform oriented against the governing Islamist elites. These shifting strategies are related to transformation in the social and ideological structures of the two movements. The focus so far has been on uncovering the alliance's deeper social roots and its modes of cultural and ideological interaction and negotiation. These point to less instrumental forms of social action borne of more long-term processes of socialisation and alterations in actors' dispositions and perspectives. It also points to the importance of social spaces outside the narrow domain of elite politics and to forms of marginality and subordinate positions within various elite strata, as creative and strategic sites wherein social movement strategies have partly formed. However, the effects of converging social crises and transverse movement cleavages have also been addressed, showing how these opened up new strategic horizons and rendered groups and social boundaries more permeable to tactical actions.

This chapter shifts focus to the political alliance itself and how the processes outlined above eventually translated into formal politics, the 2018 elections and the impact of the leftist-Sadrist alliance on Iraq's political system. Entering the realm of formal elite politics shifts the lens toward more strategic and tactical aspects of social action. Thus, this chapter

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[2] Faleh A. Jabar, 'The Iraqi Protest Movement: From Identity Politics to Issue Politics,' *LSE Middle East Centre (MEC) Paper Series*, June 22, 2018; Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, 'Social Brokers and Leftist–Sadrist Cooperation in Iraq's Reform Protest Movement: Beyond Instrumental Action,' 51, no. 2 (May 2019): 257-280.
[3] Muqtada al-Sadr, 21 Nov, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3c7WAefoUw0&feature=youtu.be
[4] Figure 18 below shows photos from the launch event on 15 January 2018 in which these banners can be seen.

outlines how political elites in the civil trend, the ICP and the Sadr movement strategically interacted with each other, rival groups and the protest movement itself in pursuit of political power. Nevertheless, although the practices of the political field generate a more 'strategic perspective' on social relations, i.e. one characterised by its more detached viewpoint and instrumental relationship toward social reality, political actors are still fully fleshed-out subjects with their own unique experiences and life stories. They are not, in other words, merely calculating and utility-maximising units. To bring this broader perspective on the lifeworld of political agents into the frame, this chapter also explores the life story of the ICP's Jassim al-Helfi and reveals how this life story relates to his role as the strategic architect of the leftist-Sadrist alliance.

## II
## Jassim al-Helfi and the ICP: The Man Behind the Leftist-Sadrist Alliance

The ICP's role in the formation of the leftist-Sadrist alliance was extremely controversial as large parts of the civil trend, and elements within the ICP itself, fiercely resisted cooperation with the Sadr movement. The Party's official version of what transpired obscures the origins of the political convergence, portraying the Sadr movement as the initiators and the ICP in an essentially reactive role. The ICP also insists that it was always committed to unifying Iraq's secular forces *as a strategic priority* and only pivoted toward the Sadr movement when the secular alliance fragmented and proved its inability to act as a broad political framework. By contrast, the ICP's fiercest detractors charged the Party of manipulating the protest movement and the civil trend for its own ends. In fact, they accused the ICP of duplicity, i.e. of engaging in a façade of seeking a united secularist political alliance while pursuing an alternative strategy with the Sadr movement behind the scenes.[5]

An alternative account is offered here that lies somewhere between these two positions. The ICP certainly followed a dual-track policy of seeking to unite the secular forces while simultaneously building an alliance with the Sadr movement from mid-2015. However, while it is difficult to know for certain, this dual strategy was probably less the result of collective party decision making and more a function of internal party splits. It also hinged on the

[5] Hassan 'Akaf, 'The sudden volte-face from the alliance of civil democratic forces to "Sairoun",' *al-Hiwar al-Mutamadan*, February 21, 2018. http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=589894&r=0 ; Sa'ib Khalil, 'al-Helfi lead a coup against the Communist Party but accuses his rivals of terrorism!' *Thawabitna,* May 26, 2018. http://www.thawabitna1.com/Article/04-05-2017/15891.html

political machinations of a single man, Jassim al-Helfi (a member of the ICP Central Committee and Politburo), who skilfully operated in an ambiguous space between the ICP and the civil trend.[6] Consequently, while Raed Fahmi had been Secretary General of the ICP since 2016, it was Helfi who formulated the strategy of the leftist-Sadrist alliance and who effectively imposed this strategy on the ICP. He achieved this by stepping outside the Party's official decision-making structures and procedures and by using the protest movement and the broader space of the civil trend to create facts on the ground. His aim was to push the ICP into his desired strategic posture.

### *Jassim al-Helfi's Story*

Helfi is a fairly unusual character within the ICP's leadership cadre in that his social background is not that of the middle-class intelligentsia. Although he recently completed a PhD at the University of Baghdad, and published his doctoral thesis on protest movements in Iraq,[7] Helfi has spent most of his life not as an intellectual, but a as a political organiser, activist and paramilitary fighter alongside the Kurdish peshmerga: 'I have always been attracted by this sort of civil work [*'amal madanī*], I love this type of work, even when I was young and before I joined the Party, and, of course, the military work [*'amal 'askarī*] for which I am known.' In this respect, Helfi can be compared with Faris Nadhmi to draw out a contrast between two distinct social roles within civil trend politics. The former was concerned with political organisation and strategic and tactical dimensions of political action; while the latter was engaged in the intellectual framing political action. Helfi was directly influenced by Nadhmi's writing and they developed a close friendship. Helfi told the author that that Nadhmi had 'created the intellectual atmosphere for this relationship between the civil trend and the Sadr movement.' But it was Helfi who took the ideas and fashioned them into a concrete political project.

Helfi was born in 1960 in Madinat al-Thawra, now Sadr City, and raised in the sprawling slum district of Baghdad that became the social base of the Sadr movement from 1990s. He grew up in a poor working-class family where he was the only boy amongst four girls:

> In our country, and in a *sha'bī* neighbourhood like ours, this was considered a great tragedy for the father. Since I was small, I depended on myself and I worked to help out.

[6] Jassim al-Helfi, interview by author, Erbil, Iraq, August 6, 2017. Information and quotes provided here are drawn from this interview unless stated otherwise.
[7] Jassim al-Helfi, *al-Harakat al-Ijtima'iyya fi-l-'Iraq* (Baghdad: Dar Sutour, 2017).

> I went to school at six years old but I also worked as a roaming vendor (milk, cigarettes, sweets). I would go around the coffee shops, the streets and the factories selling these things.

Helfi's pathway into communist politics was very typical of the experience of many of his generation. During his time in middle-school (around the age of 16), he was influenced by several teachers who turned out to be ICP members or friends of the Party. Of particular note was the intellectual, poet and well-known cultural critic 'Abd al-Rahman Tahmaji who taught Helfi Arabic literature and poetry. He also became involved in student organisations connected to the ICP (the General Students Union of the Iraqi Republic, and the Youth Union). However, Helfi was also drawn into ICP politics via sport, especially football:

> Most of the football teams in my city [Madinat al-Thawra] were leftist or communist, and they worked to attract the youngsters, and the Iraqi Democratic Youth Union belonging to the ICP was also active in this sporting space.

Particularly inspirational to the youths in Madinat al-Thawra was the famous football player Bashar Rashid, who came from the township and rose through the ranks to eventually play in the national team. In 1978, Bashar Rashid was amongst a group of communists arrested and executed by the Baʿth regime.

The execution of Bashar Rashid was a catalyst for Helfi's exile from Iraq. After the execution, he was involved in anti-regime protests which erupted in Madinat al-Thawra, and the Baʿthist purge of leftist and communist elements stepped up in intensity. Rumours circulated that those involved in the protests and were thought to have connections to Rashid and the ICP would be targeted by the regime:

> They said 'you are in danger and your names have gone to the security services, you will be charged and prosecuted.' We were only young, but the people told us that we might be sentenced to death. Arrests by the regime intensified against communists, and the ICP's democratic institutions, including the Democratic Youth Union, of which I was a member, and the General Students Union. These were circles I moved in, so I felt the only option was to leave Iraq.

At the age of 18, therefore, Helfi left Iraq for Bulgaria where thousands of Iraqi communists were gathering in exile.

From Bulgaria, Helfi travelled to Greece where he connected with the exile Iraqi community and found work as a factory labourer, later spending a period in the merchant navy where he made money by smuggling contraband. Between stints at sea, Helfi reconnected with the Party through its presence amongst Iraqi student networks in Greece. It was via these student networks that Helfi learnt of the ICP's role in the Kurdish rebellion in

northern Iraq that occurred simultaneous with the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s.[8] He determined to return to Kurdistan and join the communist partisans. To this end, he flew to Syria on a fake passport, and the ICP organisation there sent him to Lebanon where he undertook weapons training with the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine at a paramilitary camp in Naameh in southern Lebanon. He entered Kurdistan in July 1981.

In Kurdistan, Helfi earned a reputation as an effective paramilitary commander as part of the ICP's partisans fighting alongside the peshmerga. Amongst the most important military operations Helfi led was the 1987 seizure of the Salahaddin University in Erbil by some 100 peshmerga. Hostages were taken from amongst the student body, with one released each day in an attempt to draw media attention to the struggle in Kurdistan and the ICP's role therein. Helfi continued the armed struggle, even during and after the Anfal Campaign in the late 1980s:

> After the Anfal Campaign, when they had hit us with chemical weapons in Palasan, the Peshmerga forces withdrew to Iran and Turkey. We were amongst a very small group that remained in Kurdistan. I could not conceive that our movement had failed, and I was stubborn, I thought we would topple Saddam Hussein and we would be in Baghdad and finish off the dictatorship. This was my imagination, and I lived with it all those years. I could not absorb and convince myself that we were broken.

During these years, Helfi also acquired the Party *nom de guerre*, Abu Ahlam (Father of Dreams). He eventually left Kurdistan for Switzerland in July 1990, but returned to Kurdistan during the 1991 Intifada, and from then on, he moved back and forth between the two countries. In 1996, Helfi joined the Central Committee and was amongst the first group of ICP activists to reach Baghdad during the 2003 invasion (see Chapter Four).

Helfi's background, then, was that of a poor, working class *sha'bī* family in Madinat al-Thawra, and his role within the ICP was as a political organiser and paramilitary operative. This set him somewhat outside the normal social characteristics of the ICP leadership which was closely interwoven with the Iraqi middle class and the secular intelligentsia. Helfi was more on the periphery of this social world and so less bound by its norms. He was a risk taker and a political operative with ideological flexibility. His partner in leading the civil trend-Sadrist convergence, Ahmad 'Abd al-Hussein, was a quite different type of actor. 'Abd al-Hussein was politically independent, being primarily a cultural figure, a poet and journalist, not a political activist. As a duumvirate, the two possessed a configuration of

[8] Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 201-203.

social capital that enabled them to bridge the political and cultural-intellectual poles of the civil trend and to attempt to bring them into alignment. Meanwhile, their relationship to Sadr City and Iraq's working-class strata left them well placed to engage with the Sadr movement too.

### *Jassim al-Helfi and the Strategic Politics of the Leftist-Sadrist Alliance*

The impetus for Helfi to rethink the ICP's political strategy was the disappointing results for the ICP-led secular alliance – the Civil Democratic Alliance (CDA) – in Iraq's 2014 elections and particularly its failure to secure parliamentary seats for the ICP. This prompted critical reflection on the disjuncture between the civil trend's rising symbolic power and its inherent weakness as a political vehicle:

> The civil trend today is only a trend in public opinion, it has not crystalised as a political framework thus far. It is a political, social, and intellectual space in public opinion but there is not an organised political framework. Whereas, if we talk about the Sadrist trend, there is Muqtada al-Sadr, there is the Sadrist political office, there is the Sadrist parliamentary bloc etc.

This is a revealing statement given that the civil trend had contested the 2014 elections as a united political alliance and that, at the time of this interview in August 2017, the ICP was still officially negotiating with other secularist parties and civil trend allies over the potential formation of a new alliance – Taqaddum – for the 2018 elections. Helfi, however, had already concluded that the civil trend was too decentralised, too fragmented and too lacking in coherent organisation to function by itself as a useful political vehicle.

Consequently, he argued that although the rise of *manadī* politics created conditions for the civil trend to flourish and to reach a new peak in terms of electoral success and its influence over political discourse, it still lacked the means to translate these gains into more meaningful influence within the political field:

> We [the ICP] entered the 2005 election as the 'Madaniyyun' list, and we did not achieve in all of Iraq, between the communists and the independents, more than 6900 votes. However, with our work in 2013 we obtained 120,000 votes, and by 2014 it was 240,000 votes. This was a relatively huge number, but still very small when considered against the civil trend's popularity and influence which had become very important.

From Helfi's perspective, the strategic dilemma was how to place the civil trend within a broader framework for political action. However, disputes over leadership were a persistent obstacle impeding the formation of a larger political coalition. These played out within the civil trend, but also between the civil trend and other political forces. This was despite broad

agreement amongst these individuals and groups on ideological and programmatic questions and powerful strategic incentives to bandwagon against a common enemy. One obvious choice of partner would have been Ayad ‘Allawi and his nominally secular and cross-sectarian Iraqi National Accord. Nevertheless, Helfi was discouraged by his talks with ‘Allawi:

> We are holding negotiations and meetings continuously with other factions. Ayad ‘Allawi’s Iraqi National Accord wants to be with us, but he wants to lead the project and we cannot accept this. ‘Allawi cannot accept anything but the position of prime minister, and this is ridiculous, this is not possible even if he were involved in the sacrifices made by those engaged in the protests [i.e. the civil trend and the Sadrists].

In the end, no agreement was reached between the ICP and ‘Allawi’s alliance. The persistent frustration of the ICP’s efforts to linkup the civil trend to a broader political framework strategically reinforced the pathway of convergence with the Sadr movement.

However, the alliance with the Sadrists was not a solution arrived at as a last resort when broadening the civil trend’s political framework ran into trouble. Rather, for Helfi the two strategies ran in parallel and were mutually reinforcing. The broader the coalition Helfi could claim to represent, the stronger his bargaining position with the Sadr movement. Moreover, the alliance with the Sadr movement was, for Helfi at least, clearly the strategic priority. This was underpinned by a far more ambitious strategic vision than simply attaching the civil trend to a larger political framework. In fact, the full scope of this vision could not be stated publicly, as doing so would have been too controversial and damaging to the alliance. However, one senior ICP strategist did reveal this underlying strategy to the author, on condition of anonymity, stating:

> How can we change the balance of forces if we do not penetrate the system? We must, therefore, penetrate the system in order to break the system. This system is built on Sunni, Shiʿa and Kurd, but the Shiʿi alliance is the strongest and is constituted by the Sadrists, al-Daʿwa and the Supreme Council. Al-Daʿwa cannot join us, and nor can the Supreme Council. So, we search for a framework, for possibilities of joining with the Sadrists. If we can join the Sadrists to us, and thereby weaken the Shiʿi alliance and render it unstable, then if the Shiʿi alliance is weak, the system as a whole will be shaken.[9]

This describes a Gramscian ‘war of position,’ waged against the Sadr movement (or against certain sections of it), as much as against other elements of the dominant Shiʿi elites. The strategy sought to open up cleavages within the elites in order to stake out positions of influence within the political field from where a counter-hegemonic project could be

[9] Senior ICP strategist (anonymous), interview by author, 2017.

launched. It was aimed at destabilising the logic of power around which Iraq's entire post-2003 political order had been organised.

Further features of a war of position can be gleaned from Helfi's account for how the protest movement intersected with the political strategy he was pursuing. While the protests in Basra played out as a direct assault on the ruling elite by politically excluded groups (a war of maneuverer), Helfi revealed that the protests in Baghdad were a carefully calibrated game of pressure and enticement aimed primarily at disrupting the Shiʿi Islamist bloc (a war of position). Thus, he told the author:

> We also work to push [Prime Minister Haider al-] 'Abadi away from [Nouri al-] Maliki. The protest movement, which we work through and lead, remains correct and works against the corrupt and instils a fear in them. However, at the same time, we do not want to escalate it too far so that 'Abadi becomes afraid and takes refuge in Maliki.

The fact that this strategy could not be articulated publicly left the ICP, and Helfi in particular, open to charges of capitulation to Iraq's Islamist elites and of colluding with them in exchange for status and power. However, as far as Helfi was concerned, his strategy was the only one that seriously grappled with the strategic dilemma presented by Iraqi political reality by seeking to disrupt and dismantle the Islamist's political hegemony.

The electoral strategy itself came down to a game of numbers. The objective was to change the 'balance of forces' through coalition building and subversion of the enemy's alliances (seen at the time as an axis between Maliki and the political elements of the Hashd al-Sha'bi paramilitaries led by Hadi al-'Ameri). When asked about how he saw this game playing out, Helfi, in August 2017, was upbeat:

> I am optimistic that we will be the more powerful coalition. First, the Hashd al-Sha'bi, half of it is with Iran and half of it is with Muqtada al-Sadr and Sayyid al-Sistani, meaning the Hashd al-Sha'bi does not all follow Iran and its numbers are about 100,000, not a huge number in the equation. We, as the civil trend, in our broad framework that we are working on, will be at least 20 [parliamentary] seats. The Sadrist trend will be no less than 35 seats, so we have 55 in total. The other Sunni forces that we spoke about and other Shiʿi forces we work with, from both sides the total seats for them is not less than 25, making the overall total 80 seats. If 'Abadi comes with us, we become 100 seats at least. If we are 100 or 80 in the end, it will be for us to form a government, and anyone who wants a position in the government will now follow us, and Iraq will follow this path.

This was a remarkable statement. First, because Helfi predicted almost exactly the number of seats Sairoun would eventually win (54), although he overestimated the ICP-civil trend contribution to this total. And second, in how it reveals the full scope of the strategy being pursued, i.e. nothing less than controlling the formation of a new Iraqi government, and the

marginalization of Nouri al-Maliki and the Iranian-aligned elements in the Shiʿi Islamist bloc and their paramilitary allies in the Hashd al-Sha'bi.

## III
## The ICP, Taqaddum, Istiqama and Sairoun

From 2015, the ICP and the Sadr movement were both strategically interacting with forms of popular politics which they did not initiate or fully control via the mediating territory of the civil trend. The ultimate strategic goal for both movements was political, to translate the protest movement and the rise of *madanī* politics into positions of power within the political field. By the time of national elections in May 2018, the ICP had abandoned its former allies in the civil trend, withdrawn from the new secularist alliance – Taqaddum (Progress)[10] – and formed a new alliance with the Sadr movement's reformulated political party – Istiqama (Integrity) – called Sairoun lil-Islah (Marching Towards Reform, or more commonly just Sairoun). This electoral alliance claimed to represent the protest movement in the political sphere, and would go on to win May's elections, electrifying the Sadrists, the ICP and their allies in the civil trend.

For the civil trend, the lead into national elections in May 2018 were perhaps the most important strategic moment for *madanī* politics since 2003. From a position on the social and political margins, and electoral oblivion in 2005, the civil forces – led by the ICP – had gradually put themselves back on the political map. Electorally, the quarter of a million votes obtained by the CDA in 2014 was a significant step forward. However, this translated into only four parliamentary seats and none for the ICP. This was a measure of power which, by the time the protest movement got going from 2015, seemed out of kilter with the influence the civil trend seemed to be wielding outside formal political structures. The crises affecting the political field, and transverse cleavages within the Shiʿi Islamist bloc, meant the potential for the civil trend to achieve something extraordinary seemed more tangible than ever before.

[10] This alliance would be called Taqaddum, meaning progress but also an acronym for Tajammu' al-Quwa al-Dimuqratiyya al-Madaniyya, the Gathering of Civil Democratic Forces, but it would never come to fruition

### *Negotiating Electoral Alliances: The ICP, Taqaddum and Istiqama*

Ostensibly, the primary political vehicle for civil trend politics between the 2014 and 2018 elections was Taqaddum (Tajammu' al-Quwa al-Dimuqratiyya al-Madaniyya, the Gathering of Civil Democratic Forces, or 'Progress') a political alliance that sought to rebuild a united civil trend electoral platform. This followed the disunity and fragmentation of the previous alliance, al-Tahaluf al-Madani al-Dimuqrati (the Civil Democratic Alliance, CDA) following the disappointing 2014 elections. Taqaddum was the ICP's initiative to replace the CDA, but due to personal and political antagonisms that had grown within the CDA, only Mithal al-Alusi's Ummah Party and Dr 'Ali al-Rufai's newly-constituted al-Tayyar al-Ijtima'i al-Dimuqrati (the Social Democratic Trend), were involved. Shirouk al-'Abayachi and Faiq al-Shaykh 'Ali went their own way.

However, Taqaddum struggled with internal disputes almost from the start. The ICP was keen to transform the alliance into a much broader coalition that could genuinely impact on the political scene. Salam 'Ali,[11] a member of the ICP Central Committee, outlined these disputes to the author in the following terms:

> There were problems when we started setting up Taqaddum. Our position was that it should be expanded into a loose alliance to include people like Ghassan al-Attiyah.[12] Attiyah was formerly Baʿthist, but after 2003 he was close to the civil groups, and before the 2018 elections he set up a coalition including some tribal elements but with a liberal tendency. And we were also negotiating with the INC, formerly led by Chalabi who was dead by that time. However, some of the groups in Taqaddum were against bringing them in because they were accused of murdering some of their activists, there was internal wrangling, that sort of thing. So, there were problems about expanding Taqaddum to become a strong electoral alliance to contest the elections.

Nevertheless, according to 'Ali, the ICP's primary strategic objective, right up until late December early January 2018, was unification of the civil forces in a secular, non-sectarian political bloc: 'we continued with this strategy [of unifying the civil forces], we worked to set up Taqaddum, holding conferences in the provinces, and connecting that with a conference in Baghdad. So, *it was almost there*, and *this was the primary strategy of the party*.' (Emphasis added.) [13]

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[11] Salam Ali, interview by author, London, UK, July 12, 2019. Information and quotes discussed here draw on the aforementioned interview and subsequent follow-up discussions between the author and Ali.

[12] Ghassan al-Attiyah was a member of the exile Iraqi opposition pre-2003. Post-2003 he returned to Baghdad as director of the NGO Iraq Foundation for Development and Democracy. The statement that Attiyah was a Baʿthist is the view of Salam 'Ali and not the author.

[13] In line with the principles adopted by the Party at the 10th Congress in 2016.

At the same time, Muqtada was taking radical steps vis-à-vis the Sadr movement's political wing which he had already withdrawn from cooperation with the Shiʿi Islamist bloc (the INA).[14] In December 2017, he announced the formation of a new political entity, Istiqama (Integrity),[15] and stipulated that none of the movement's existing MPs could stand for re-election with the new entity (with the exception of Majda al-Tamimi, and Sabah Asadi). Instead, in a move designed to capitalise on Sadrist participation in the protest movement, and to make the Sadrist political project align with the protest's central demand to move away from the sectarian and party quota system, Muqtada would forward a new list of so-called 'independents' and 'technocrats,' not affiliated with the Sadr movement's previous politics.

Muqtada's purge of Ahrar was highly symbolic, but also somewhat quixotic and led to complications for the movement's political project. It alienated some senior Sadrist political actors who left the movement. Perhaps more damaging, the purge removed precious skills and experience from the movement's political operations. Dhia al-Asadi, for instance, formerly head of the Ahrar bloc in parliament was removed. Asadi, who speaks fluent English and studied English literature at university, was a prominent Sadrist political figure with considerable standing amongst the civil trend and secular intelligentsia. He was thus ideally placed to lend credibility to Istiqama, represent it in the public sphere and to help manage the political relationships between Istiqama and the ICP/civil trend.

In the end, a relative unknown and inexperienced figure, Hassan 'Abd Allah al-'Aquli, was made Secretary General of Istiqama, while Asadi was relegated to an ambiguous external relations role for the political committee at the OMS. 'Aquli turned out to be problematic appointment. For instance, in a car-crash television interview on al-Hura[16] he denied having any connection to Muqtada or the Sadrist movement (despite having stood as a Sadrist in previous elections, albeit at a local level), appeared confused about whether Istiqama was Islamist or secularist in orientation, and was also unclear about its adherence to Muqtada or *vilāyat-i faqīh*. It was an expert dismantling by his interviewer. However, what the interview primarily revealed was the Sadr movement's dearth of political expertise and

[14] See chapter five.
[15] 'The Sadrist Trend Announces Creation of Istiqama Party,' *As-Sabah al-Jadid,* December 20, 2018. http://newsabah.com/newspaper/142684
[16] 'Dialogue with secretary general of the national Istiqama Hassan 'Abd Allah al-Aquli,' *al-Hurra Iraq,* February 5, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eOfTc5WC_D4&feature=youtu.be

actors equipped to act autonomously from the movement's religious leadership, particularly Muqtada.

These performances from the new Sadrist political party cemented opposition to a cross-movement alliance in some quarters of the civil trend. The ICP's official position was that the it persisted with Taqaddum and held to the strategic primacy of uniting the secular forces, all the way up to the deadline for registering new coalitions with the Electoral Commission by January 2018. The Party sought to apply pressure to open up Taqaddum to other political forces, however the new alliance remained its primary political vehicle. So how did the ICP end up abandoning Taqaddum, further fragmenting the civil trend politically and entering into a last-minute alliance with Istiqama?

The ICP's official story focuses on events immediately prior to the 2018 elections. According to 'Ali, the Sadrists approached the ICP at this late stage to discuss ways and means of cooperating in the upcoming elections, and the ICP conveyed this message to Taqaddum:

> This is how the negotiations started, and this timetable is very important, as they [the Sadrists] came late on. On the one hand, Taqaddum had gone ahead with its small structure, and was still discussing possibilities of expanding, *and this was in 2018 on the eve of the elections. This is late December 2017/January 2018.* [Emphasis added.]

This presented problems as the Electoral Commission had set a deadline for the registration of political alliances which left little time for negotiations between the groups. Nevertheless, according to 'Ali, the ICP's partners in Taqaddum were initially positive towards cooperation with Istiqama:

> Everybody was involved in the negotiations, [Rufai's] Social Democratic Trend, and the others were actually keen to negotiate… there was no objection in principle to setting up an electoral alliance, except for one small group, [Hizb al-Tajammu' min ajal al-Dimuqratiyya], the Party of the Gathering for Democracy][17] that objected to bringing a religious party into the alliance [on ideological grounds].

According to 'Ali, the main stumbling block between Taqaddum and Istiqama was not primarily ideological, but over control and influence over the leadership and implementation bodies of the new entity:

> Istiqama accepted that the general secretariat would be the body where policy was formulated, the political committee would be for implementation. However, they wanted

[17] According to Salam 'Ali: 'It put forward, as an alternative, inviting the National Congress (INC) to join Taqaddum. This position, however, was opposed by the Republican Grouping Party (within Taqaddum). After several meetings, it was clear that the Republican Grouping and Nida' al-Rafidain (also part of Taqaddum) were keen to join the alliance with the Istiqama party.'

> the leadership position, based on the fact that they had already over 30 members in parliament, that was the understanding. We [the ICP] pushed for the possibility of a civil figure in the leading role, but it was clear from discussion that the other side were keen to have this position.

These negotiations continued up to the deadline for registration with the Electoral Commission.

Again, according to the ICP, resistance from the other partners in Taqaddum was rooted in their fear that a Sadrist assuming the leadership position would give the appearance that the civil trend had fallen under Sadrist domination. Nevertheless, again, according to 'Ali, the other key group in Taqaddum, the Social Democrat Trend had initially supported the agreement with Istiqama, but changed its mind at the last minute:

> Now this other group, led by 'Ali al-Rufai, initially agreed initially to go ahead, and present the final document and programme of the new alliance to the electoral commission, the initial date was set for Monday, this was Thursday. On Friday, Ali Rufai phoned and said 'we have a problem and cannot go ahead.' We set up a meeting between Rufai and Muqtada in Najaf, but Rufai could not persuade him [Muqtada] to allow a civil trend person in the leadership role.

It looked, therefore, likely that Taqaddum and Istiqama had reached an impasse, and had run out of road to continue negotiations.

With Taqaddum and the alliance with Istiqama hanging in the balance, the Electoral Commission extended the deadline for registration by four days giving all the parties a little breathing space. During this period, the ICP conducted an internal referendum on whether to pursue an alliance with Istiqama irrespective of the decision of its partners in Taqaddum. According to the ICP, the time constraints imposed by the Electoral Commission deadline meant this referendum was limited to senior positions (provincial committee members and above). The results of this referendum were 82 percent in favour of the broader alliance with Istiqama.[18] Taqaddum, and those parties that refused to join with Istiqama were abandoned, and the ICP formed Sairoun with the Sadr movement and registered this new entity with the Electoral Commission on 10 January 2018, just before the deadline expired.

The 82 percent figure seemed high given the degree of noise regarding internal opposition to the ICP-Sadrist alliance that was filtering out from the Party. However, there is

[18] Senior ICP activity (anonymous), discussion with the author via electronic communication, 2019. According to this senior ICP source, a meeting of the ICP's Central Committee on January 8, 2018 decided to carry out an internal referendum on whether to join the alliance with Istiqama and five other groups or join the alliance with the groups that remained in Taqaddum.
The first option (for a broad national alliance) received 82 percent of the vote. The second option received 14 percent, and 4 percent abstained.

reason to take plausibly the notion that the alliance had significant support within the ICP's leadership by January 2018. As set out at the 10th Congress in 2016, the strategic aim of the Party was not just to unite the civil trend, but to expand this coalition by drawing in larger political entities. The ICP was frustrated by the reluctance of its civil trend partners to open up the coalition. Support for the alliance could also draw on two sources within the Party: true believers; and those making more pragmatic calculations. There is no reason to doubt that Helfi and many of his allies were true believers in the alliance. However, at least some ICP activists were far more pragmatic in their outlook. One anecdote captures the mood of many in the Party at the time Sairoun was announced:

> We were drinking in a bar, and we were joined by a communist friend. He was shouting 'We got him! We got him! Everyone wanted him, but we got him!' He was talking about Muqtada. I think they had grand dreams about getting 15 MPs for the ICP, and they were sold on Muqtada by Jassim and others. We were surprised, but he said: 'Don't worry, we'll get the seats and if we don't like where it's heading, we can move separately. We'll be a political force to be reckoned with.[19]

(In the event, despite winning the elections, aspirations for the ICP gaining 10-15 MPs melted into air, and the realities of 'doing politics' in Iraq quickly subdued the euphoria of election night.)

Critics of the ICP from within the civil trend argued the Party never seriously engaged with Taqaddum, viewing the alliance merely as a 'placeholder,' a backup in case the alliance with the Sadr movement fell through. From this perspective, the Sadrist alliance was always the strategic priority for the ICP. Personalities from the CDA and Taqaddum claimed, not without evidence, that the ICP was working in the background to secure an alliance with Sadrists even when Taqaddum was announced, and that this was a form of duplicity and betrayal of their *madanī* partners and allies. As shown previously, the ICP was certainly following a two-track policy in the sense that Helfi was seeking to secure an alliance with the Sadrists as early as 2015. However, he operated in an ambiguous space between the Party, the protest movement and friendly elements of the civil trend's non-political activist leadership. Meanwhile, officially, the ICP was publicly focused on Taqaddum.

Helfi hardly made a secret of this, revealing to the author that he held the first meeting with Muqtada on 23rd October 2015, mere months after the outbreak of protests. What is

[19] This story was related to the author by a Baghdad-based friend of the ICP, on condition of anonymity. Location of story and names involved have been changed to protect anonymity.

less clear, is whether Helfi was acting in this meeting as an official political representative of the ICP, or as a civil trend activist and leader of the protest movement (as were the other non-ICP activists who attended).[20] However, at the August 2017 interview with the author, Helfi discussed aspects of his political strategy on condition that details not be published until after the 2018 elections. What he revealed makes an interesting comparison with the ICP's official story. When asked about the strategy going into the 2018 elections the following year, Helfi explained:

> We are working to find a project that will be *madanī, Sadri,* and moderate-Islamic in order to change the balance of forces. Of course, we are working towards the elections. We will participate in the largest nationalist alliance: the Sadr trend, al-Ahrar bloc, and the forces of the Sadr movement and the prominent forces of the civil trend. We will work for a political framework between the civil trend and the Sadr trend.

Clearly then, Helfi's was seeking to form an electoral alliance with the Sadr movement behind the scenes of the protest movement. Taqaddum itself was never the strategic priority, but more of a tool for uniting as many political elements of the civil trend as possible, and thereby strengthening Helfi's negotiating position with the Muqtada.

Thus, when asked about his confidence in the ICP's ability to unite the civil trend and bring the movement into alliance with the Sadrists, Helfi explained:

> They are coming. I spoke to Muqtada al-Sadr and said to him, *we civil forces will participate in the alliance with you in the elections*. Now there are those who do not want the convergence with Muqtada al-Sadr, they will not vote for us in the elections. However, inside the parliament we will cooperate, even those not convinced by the convergence will be for cooperation inside the parliament. [Emphasis added].

Helfi was not overly concerned about the *madanī* allies that might be lost by aligning with the Sadr movement, since he assumed that these elements would align with the ICP's bloc in parliament post-elections in any event.

Was the ICP consciously duplicitous in its pursuit of this two-track strategy? Answering this question ultimately rests on a judgement as to whether the strategy emerged from coherent policy decisions taken collectively by the ICP Central Committee and Politburo. From Helfi's perspective, the two-track approach was not contradictory, but strategically coherent. The more civil trend partners the ICP could claim to represent and could bring into alliance with the Sadr movement, the more strategically valuable the alliance from the Sadrist perspective and better the chance of securing Muqtada's support. It does not

[20] See chapter five.

necessarily follow from this, however, that the mainstream of the ICP leadership was fully onboard with Helfi's strategy, or that its dealings with Taqaddum were insincere.

Indeed, other parts of the ICP leadership maintained a studied distance from the Sadrists, even while Helfi was publicly embracing the Islamist movement's participation in the protests. It was not until March 2017, for instance, that a Sadrist delegation met with ICP Secretary General Raed Fahmi for the first time, in a meeting designed to 'strengthen coordination and cooperation [between the two parties] and develop the peaceful protest movement.'[21] There was no public mention of a party-political alliance. Similarly, when Tariq al-Sha'b reported on the 21 August 2017 meeting between an ICP delegation headed by Fahmi and the Sadrist *al-hay'a al-siyyāsiyya* in Baghdad, the only reference to the coming elections was a reiteration of both parties' commitment to 'building an integrated electoral system that guarantees equal opportunities for all and contributes to achieving fair, transparent and credible elections.'[22]

It seems more likely that Helfi, operating largely outside the ICP's formal party structures and processes, was attempting to manoeuvre the Party towards alliance with the Sadr movement by creating facts on the ground through the protest movement and the civil trend-Sadrist convergence. In doing so, he was able to draw parts of the civil trend and Sadr movement together, and suck them into a political framework, creating momentum towards a political alliance that eventually swept away all internal dissenters. The ICP's two-track approach, in this view, was more a function of an internal division within the ICP, with its leaders pursuing competing strategies, than of a more concerted plot to out-manoeuvre and manipulate the civil trend. In any case, this internal division of labour between the two strategies ultimately worked to Helfi's advantage.

### *Sairoun: Symbolism, Ideology and Political Programme*

The symbolism, ideology and political programme that Sairoun put forward was entirely secularised and combined aspects of left-leaning social-democratic and liberal currents. In this respect, as with the protest movement itself, the civil trend, and specifically the ICP, seems to have had a great deal of influence over the alliance's symbolic representation and

[21] 'The Sadrist trend and the Communist Party search for coordination in the protests,' *All Iraq News*, 7 March 2017. http://www.alliraqnews.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=59178
[22] *Tariq al-Sha'b,* August 23, 2017.

ideological articulation in public political space. The Sadr movement largely signed up to these political forms as a condition of its joint participation in the protests and maintaining coherence between the protests and the political project that followed then became a further factor leveraging the Sadrists into this ideological mould.

Behind the scenes, however, Muqtada and the Sadr movement were initially resistant to the term '*al-dawla al-madaniyya*' becoming the symbolic and ideological centrepiece of the coalition. Consequently, in mid-2017, both sides were exploring the potential for substituting *al-dawla al-madaniyyia* with *dawlat al-muwāṭana*, which the Sadrists felt had weaker secularist and atheistic connotations, and less conceptual baggage in Iraqi politics (see Chapter Four).[23] Helfi, for instance, told the author: 'Muqatada told us that talk of a civil trend, or a civil state, provokes the Islamists and creates opposition and distortion, so we say '*dawlat al-muwāṭana*,' with the same meaning as a civil state. Muqtada says "we and you are national forces, a national and Islamic current, not civil but national (*waṭanī*), we gather in the same project."' This suggests that Muqtada was initially keen to maintain a civil-Islamic distinction between the two parties.

It is also worth referring here to a book Muqtada published during the civil trend-Sadrist convergence entitled: 'Hiwar al-Tayyar al-Dini (al-Islami) ma' al-Tayyar al-Madani' (The Dialogue of the Religious (Islamic) Trend with the Civil Trend).[24] This text did not set out a systematic or programmatic ideological position. It was, rather, a document that remained essentially religious in nature, being a collection of Muqtada's *bayanāt* – religious statements – in response to his followers. Ipso facto, the document should be approached as an important aspect of Muqtada's religious and political practice during the 2015-2018 period and not as a definitive statement of his 'true beliefs' or political principles.

As a practice, the text tends to the reproduction of political-religious field boundaries. This is inherent in its discursive form (religious *bayanāt*), i.e. Muqtada is not attempting, through this particular practice, to enter into the intellectual field. This also flows from the substance of the discourse too. Thus, Muqtada is persistent in refusing to be drawn into giving definitive political-ideological statements, claiming that politics is for the Iraqi people to decide and, by extension, not for clerics to impose. For instance, one question asks: 'Are

[23] Jassim al-Helfi, interview by author, Erbil, Iraq, August 6, 2017.
[24] Al-Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr, *Hiwar al-Tayyar al-Dini (al-Islami) ma' al-Tayyar al-Madani* (Najaf: The Institute for the Heritage of the Martyr al-Sadr, 2015).

you a supporter of a pluralistic Islamic state which secures the rights of all Iraqis?' Muqtada responded as follows:

> I am not an advocate of an Islamic state or any other type of state. I call for the political path to be in the hands of the people, and what the people decide should be the path that Iraq follows.[25]

Similarly, a further question asks: 'Should the Iraqi constitution be based on the noble Qur'an, or on positive [secular] law, and what is the position of the Sadrist line [*al-khaṭ al-ṣadrī*] on these two possibilities?' Muqtada responded as follows:

> In truth, I absolve myself of this matter. I do not intervene in this question, whether it should be Islamic or non-Islamic. Personally, I prefer the Islamic, but it remains for the Iraqi people to decide the constitution.[26]

On the question of the civil state, which lay at the heart of ideological controversies surrounding the civil trend-Sadrist convergence, Muqtada was drawn into a somewhat more elaborate conceptual elucidation. For instance, one question asks: 'There is wide circulation in Najaf for adopting the concept of a civil state [*al-dawla al-madaniyya*]. What do you understand by this concept, and the role of religion within a civil state?' Muqtada's response again reveals his reluctance to adopt the terminology of a 'civil state', as opposed to a 'citizenship state':

> The civil state [*al-dawla al-madaniyya*] or, more properly, the citizenship state [*dawlat al-muwāṭana*] is one that gives everybody a single identity regardless of religion, sect or ethnicity. However, the point of difference is that this is not achieved unless secularism is followed by taking religion out of politics. I say that this cannot be applied except through the Islamisation of society and its culture on a fundamental level, and the organisation of true Islam and the spirit of justice and equality through tolerance and genuine brotherhood.[27]

As a statement of ideological precepts, this is rather vague. It suggests that the value of a civil state lies in how it provides a single identity that transcends particular religious, sectarian and ethnic identities, while also holding that this unity can only be achieved through the Islamisation of society. However, as a practice, this is a fairly standard clerical position that seeks to distance religion from politics by focusing on non-state aspects of Islamic activism.

However, as Figure 18, below, illustrates, the launch of Sairoun took place under a banner reading: 'For building a civil state [*al-dawla al-madaniyya*] … a state of citizenship

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[25] al-Sadr, *Hiwar al-Tayyar,* 10.
[26] al-Sadr, *Hiwar al-Tayyar,* 11.
[27] al-Sadr, *Hiwar al-Tayyar,* 40-41.

[*dawlat al-muwāṭana*] and social justice.' In more ideological and programmatic terms, Sairoun's political manifesto[28] focused on the key objectives of the protest movement, thus its opening statement read: 'The programme of the Sairoun Alliance is a national project that transcends sectarianism and opposes it,' and was aimed at 'the salvation [of Iraq] from the regime of sectarian and political quotas [*al-muḥāṣaṣa' al-ṭā'ifiyya wal-ḥizbiyya*].' The manifesto situates these objectives within a political-ideological framework anchored in the notion of the civil state. The goals of the alliance were, therefore, to be achieved via 'the strengthening of the civil [*madanī*] and democratic character of the state'. Moreover, the first pledge of the manifesto, under the heading 'reform and building the state,' reads:

> Establishing a civil state [*dawla madaniyya*] on the basis of citizenship, securing social justice and a state with strong institutions capable of taking independent decisions reflecting its prestige and the national sovereignty of the country.

Similarly, the concluding paragraph of the manifesto reiterates this commitment:

> We are determined to work together with sincere efforts to fulfil the commitments of our alliance to the citizens and voters such that Sairoun is a name recognised for action and hope in order to establish a civil democratic state which puts the country on the path to realising security, stability and prosperity and initiating sustainable development and realising genuine progress and social justice.

The Sadr movement's initial objection to the term *dawla madaniyya* had clearly shifted between mid-207 and early 2018.

[28] For a full translation of the Sairoun manifesto, see Appendix II

*Figure 17 Sairoun launch event 15 January, 2019. Banner reads: 'For building a civil state... A state based on citizenship and social justice'. Images taken from social media coverage of the event.*



There are two significant reasons that could explain why this shift occurred. First, where '*dawla madaniyya*' is used explicitly in the manifesto's text, it is couched in terms that allude to questions of sovereignty, national independence, strong state institutions and security. It is not linked to potentially more controversial questions such as the religious identity of the state, the status of religion in constitutional law and personal status codes and the wider

role of religion and religious institutions in state and society (all assiduously avoided in the manifesto which barely mentions religion at all). This points to the previously discussed ambiguity in the phrase '*dawla madaniyya*,' and thus to its value as a strategic discourse which Muqtada and the Sadr movement could weaponise against the movement's rivals in the PMF and their political groups. This use of 'civil state' draws out a distinction between *madanī* and *'askari* (military), allowing Muqtada to present himself as a defender of the Iraqi state and its sovereignty against what he called the 'impudent' militias associated with foreign (Iranian) power.[29] Second, since the manifesto text avoids talking about religion, it is plausible that for the Sadr movement '*al-dawla al-madaniyya,'* became a useful means of distinguishing the movement's professed opposition to sectarianism and commitment to nationalism vis-à-vis its Islamist rivals, without committing it to any concrete vision of a secular polity normally entailed by the notion of a civil state.

This said, the full text of the manifesto contains numerous provisions that flesh out a more conventional understanding of a civil state in terms of protections for minorities, freedom of religious belief, and a range of freedoms and rights aimed at cultural and intellectual creativity and expression. The manifesto commits Sairoun to 'protection of human rights and civil freedoms: freedom of thought, belief and expression, freedom of the press, freedom of political, professional and trade union work, freedom of protest and all forms of peaceful demonstration.' There are also pledges more specifically targeted at the secular intelligentsia, including a commitment to spend one percent of the annual budget on cultural activity, and to 'ensure the rights of intellectuals [*al-muthaqafīn*], creative freedom and freedom of thought in cultural production.' The manifesto also addressed the status of women directly, with a pledge to: 'ensure the rights of women and widening their participation in economic, social and political life.'

The alliance's manifesto attempted to connect Sairoun with the 2015 protest movement and thus to draw on its symbolic legitimation. In fact, it goes so far as to claim that the Sairoun alliance is unique amongst political groupings in Iraq in that it has emerged from forms of popular politics and is thus organically connected to the people. The preamble to the manifesto states that:

[29] Muqtada himself used the term 'civil state,' describing himself as '*rajul al-dawla al-madaniyya*,' (the civil state man) within a long rhetorical attack on the PMF in which he called for closing down their offices and deploying the Iraqi armed forces to secure borders and territory liberated from Islamic State. See 'Muqtada al-Sadr addresses the international community in as the "civil state man",' *al-'Arab,* 21 February, 2017.

> Sairoun is an alliance of a new kind, one that emerged from the heart of society and from the popular protest movement, where forms of cooperation and coordination developed between our nationalist peoples participating the movement from different sections [of society].

Here, the strategies of the ICP and the Sadr movement aligned, i.e. in utilizing the protest movement to revivify their symbolic legitimacy, to distinguish themselves from other political elites and, ultimately, to translate forms of popular politics which they did not in fact initiate or fully control into political power.

There was nothing communistic about Sairoun's political platform, but this is not surprising given that the ICP had long ceased to be a radical Marxist-Leninist or even Marxist party (see Chapter Four). The Sairoun manifesto was vague on details, but was, otherwise, a standard statement of the forms of social-democratic and liberal politics that predominated amongst the Iraqi secular intelligentsia, and which had shaped the ICP's ideological transformation during the 1990s and in the post-2003 period. Economically, for instance, the manifesto talks of strengthening private sector investment, private banking and diversification from oil dependence. In terms of the oil sector, the manifesto merely talks of:

> Adopting a rational oil law [to] re-establish the National Oil Company to take over administration and oversight of the process of exploration, extractions and development in oil and gas fields.

Even on the question of private education, the manifesto strikes a pragmatic and less-than-radical note, affirming only that private schooling institutions must 'conform to the applicable laws and regulations.' While alliance with the Sadr movement was itself a hugely controversial decision for the ICP and civil trend, the symbolic and ideological content of the alliance was largely on their own terms.

The question of whether the Sadr movement's commitment to the Sairoun entailed a radical shift in its ideological orientation is more difficult parse. The Sadrists have, historically, been a messianic religious movement, i.e. one that has not sought to combine professional politics with systematic political ideology or distinct party-political modes of legitimation and authority. In one sense, this gave the movement greater ideological flexibility because it was not constrained by a systematised political-ideological structure that had to be fundamentally adapted or rethought. What a Sadrist politics might look like as a coherent and systematic ideological practice was more open to definition and influence by forces within, and external to, the movement.

However, this thesis has also argued that processes of Sadrist ideological development emerged and gathered pace with the movement's greater investment in its cultural capacities from 2009. This process has been unevenly distributed and localised in particular strata of the movement. Consequently, the Sairoun's ideological and symbolic politics aligned with the proclivities of the so-called *munfataḥīn* faction, while being threatening to the *munghalaqīn* who resisted the criticised the alliance (both internally and publicly). These localised social processes, and their effects on differentiating Sadrist cultural and ideological orientations, did not translate directly into the Sadr movement's strategic politics. Rather, this transition involved refraction through Muqtada's leadership, i.e. through the process of inter-factional brokerage through which Muqtada mediated relationships between the movement's fragmented leadership strata.

## IV
## A Stunning Victory?

The results of Iraq's 12 May 2018 elections stunned the Iraqi political establishment and outside observers alike. Sairoun emerged as the largest list, gaining 54 seats, a 20-seat gain on the total achieved by Ahrar in 2014. The list of incumbent Prime Minister, Haider al-'Abadi, who had been expected to benefit from the successful war against Islamic State, came a disappointing third with 42 seats. In second place, with 47 seats, was the Fatah alliance of Iranian-aligned paramilitary groups in the Hashd al-Sha'bi, headed by Badr Organisation leader Hadi al-'Ameri. The two big winners on the night were the political blocs who had most successfully drawn on domains of symbolic legitimacy located outside formal political structures: the protest movement; and the Popular Mobilisation. 'Abadi suffered in part because he was seen as most accountable for the failures of the state and the political field to deliver systemic reform.

The initial reaction from those involved in Sairoun was delighted celebration. On the morning after the results started to come in, one architect of the alliance told the author:

> We celebrated last night in Baghdad with many friends. Hundreds of people celebrated in Tahrir Square after midnight. I feel we were quite right when we called for this alliance. Now there is a real hope for Iraq to start moving away from sectarianism. At least the first step.[30]

[30] Faris Kamal Nadhmi, follow-up discussions with the author via electronic communication, May 14, 2019.

Secretary General of the ICP, Raed Fahmi, released a statement on May 13 welcoming the 'encouraging information and news about the election results,' and stating that 'what is beyond doubt is that Sairoun has achieved a huge success and caused a big surprise in most of the provinces.'[31] There were even rumours circulating on social media that Muqtada could nominate ICP Secretary General Raed Fahmi for the position of prime minister.[32] Irrespective, it seemed that the ICP and the Sadr movement had succeeded in placing themselves back at the heart of Iraqi politics and that Jassim al-Helfi, while not sitting in parliament, had nevertheless secured his status as a powerful behind-the-scenes political broker.

Much international media and analysis, focusing mainly on Muqtada's political role, expressed shock and optimistic prognostication in equal measure. Cockburn wrote that 'Muqtada al-Sadr, the nationalist populist Shia cleric, has once again defied predictions,' and that his campaign for 'social and political reform and against a corrupt and dysfunctional political establishment… appealed strongly to Iraqis who feel that, with the war won against Isis, they need to rebuild their country.' According to Cockburn, 'Mr Sadr will be very much the kingmaker – though he will have no official position – in the formation of a new Iraqi government'.[33] Others talked of 'the reinvention of Muqtada al-Sadr, Iraq's new face of reform,'[34] of Muqtada being 'Iraq's best hope,'[35] and his being 'a foe of both Iran and the US'.[36]

However, the initial euphoria over Sairoun's electoral success and expectations regarding its potential role both in spearheading meaningful political reform and resisting Iranian influence (seen by many as two sides of the same coin), were quickly tempered by new realities. Helfi's prediction that the leftist-Sadrist alliance would score 54 seats in the election was almost correct. However, Helfi's figure was based on the Sadrist maintaining

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[31] Raed Fahmi, May 13, 2018, Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/raid.fahmi.9/posts/10156352079442264
[32] Although privately ICP contacts told the author this was extremely unlikely, partly owing to the fact that Fahmi was a Sunni. Nevertheless, they claim 'Muqtada can support him as a game of pressure against the sectarian Shia leaders.'
[33] Patrick Cockburn, 'Election success for Muqtada al-Sadr shows Iraqi voters shaking off foreign intervention,' *The Independent,* May 15, 2018. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iraq-election-results-muqtada-al-sadr-future-kurds-muqtada-sadr-a8352946.html
[34] Margaret Cocker, 'The reinvention of Muqtada al-Sadr, Iraq's new face of reform,' *The Irish Times,* May 21, 2018. https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/middle-east/the-reinvention-of-muqtada-al-sadr-iraq-s-new-face-of-reform-1.3502755
[35] Michael D. Sullivan, 'I Fought Against Muqtada al-Sadr. Now He's Iraq's Best Hope,' *Foreign Policy,* June 18, 2018. https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/18/i-fought-against-muqtada-al-sadr-now-hes-iraqs-best-hope/
[36] Nicole Gaouette, 'Iraqi election makes US foe al-Sadr a potential kingmaker,' *CNN,* May 16, 2018. https://edition.cnn.com/2018/05/16/politics/sadr-iraq-us-election/index.html

the seats won by al-Ahrar in 2014 (34), and the ICP and its civil trend allies adding a further 20 of their own (hence the ICP's anticipation of ten-fifteen seats for the Party). As the results filtered through, the outcome for the ICP, measured against these expectations, started to look fairly disastrous. Of the 56 candidates the ICP fielded with Sairoun, only two secured parliamentary seats: Raed Fahmi came second in Baghdad with 19,493 votes; and Haifa 'Abd al-Jalil AKA Haifa al-Amin, the famous female ICP activist, came third in Dhi Qar with 12,395.[37] The Party briefly hoped they had caused an upset when it was reported that another female ICP candidate, Suhad al-Khateeb, had won a seat in Najaf, but this turned out to be a narrow miss.[38]

When considered purely in electoral terms, the Sairoun alliance had overwhelmingly benefitted Istiqama and not the ICP. Detailed analysis of the vote figures showed that Sairoun's victory was predicated firstly on an expansion in the Sadrist vote share in southern provinces: Basra, Maysan, Muthanna and Dhi Qar. And secondly, on modest and sometimes substantial contributions by ICP and other secularist candidates on the Sairoun list, particularly in Baghdad, Basra, Babil, Diwaniyah and Dhi Qar. However, only in Baghdad and Dhi Qar did this *madanī* vote contribution translate into seats for the ICP, as opposed to simply boosting Istiqama.[39] With only two parliamentary seats, the ICP was more reliant on the alliance with the Sadrists to maintain political relevance. The notion that some cadres held prior to the election, that after the vote they could go their own way and remain a political force, evaporated.

The other crucial factor explaining Sairoun's victory was the collapse in voter turnout. Overall, this reached a record low of 44.5 percent.[40] Turnout in Basra was estimated to be as low of 14.4 percent.[41] On the one hand, this low turnout benefitted the Sadr movement since Muqtada remained uniquely capable of mobilising his base. On the other, it pointed to a hard and bitter reality for the ICP and Sairoun, namely, that the new wave of popular politics that emerged from 2015 which Sairoun was meant to represent politically, had

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[37] Figures based on official results database provided by Iraqi Electoral Commission.
[38] Alex MacDonald, Mustafa Abu Sneineh, 'First female Communist MP in Iraq's holiest city calls for 'social justice,' *Middle East Eye,* May 16, 2018. https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/first-female-communist-mp-iraqs-holiest-city-calls-social-justice
[39] This is based analysis of the election results conducted by Kirk H. Sowell for *Inside Iraqi Politics*, issue no. 102, May 2018, provided to author by Kirk H. Sowell.
[40] Renad Mansour Christine van den Toorn, 'The 2018 Iraqi Federal Elections a Population in Transition?' *LSE Middle East Center Report* (July 2018), 6.
[41] One author argues that the turnout was as low as 14.4 percent in Basra. See: Matthew Schweitzer, 'Protests in Southern Iraq Intensify, Is Instability to Follow?' *The Global Observatory*, July 24, 2018. https://theglobalobservatory.org/2018/07/protests-southern-iraq-intensify-is-instability-to-follow/

simply not participated in the elections, particularly in Basra. Consequently, there was little evidence to support Cockburn's contention that Sairoun had successfully made itself the political vessel containing and organising popular discontent with the political system and desire for systemic reform, particularly outside Baghdad.

As if to drive this point home, only a matter of months after May's elections, Basra erupted in a new, more radical phase of popular politics and resistance. The divisions between the civil elites, the ICP, the Sadr movement and the protesters they claimed to lead and represent were now clarified in stark terms. As these elites called for calm and for time to continue in negotiations over a future government, protesters in Basra ignored the self-styled protest leaders in Baghdad and continued to escalate their demonstrations, ransacking and burning down provincial government buildings as well as the offices of the main Shiʿi Islamist parties and militias (although the Sadr movement was uniquely spared).[42] Baghdad, by contrast, remained quiet, further clarifying the extent to which the protest movement in the capital was more integrated into elite politics.

Sairoun's strategy of building a large alliance to outflank Fatah and the Maliki-Iran axis depended on keeping 'Abadi in play and detaching him from the Shiʿi Islamist bloc. The weak showing for 'Abadi, and the strong second-place finish of Hadi al-'Ameri's Fatah coalition, with prominent Sadr movement rivals 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq going from a single seat to fifteen within this alliance, presented an extremely challenging political dilemma for both the Sadr movement and the ICP. They were now faced with the reality of having to negotiate with Fatah over government formation. This looked like a complete abandonment of the principles of the protest movement on which Sairoun had staked its political credibility. It also signalled a reassertion of the Shiʿi Islamist bloc as the core organising structure of the political field, undercutting one of the ICP's fundamental strategic objectives in pursuing the alliance with the Sadr movement.

For the ICP, in particular, this outcome would have been an unmitigated disaster. However, this was also a clarifying test of Muqtada and the Sadr movement's autonomy from Iran and commitment to cleaving a distinct political path from the sect-based political alliance that had hegemonized Iraqi politics since 2005. For a period, it looked like a Muqtada/Sairoun-'Ameri/Fatah accommodation was a distinct possibility. Muqtada was

[42] Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, 'As Protests Sweep Iraq, are the Country's Political Elites Running out of Options?' *LSE Middle East Centre,* July 18, 2018. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/07/18/as-protests-sweep-iraq-are-the-countrys-political-elites-running-out-of-options/

under extraordinary pressure from other Shiʿi Islamist groups and directly from Iran to re-enter the fold. Iranian media outlets had responded to Sairoun's victory with considerable apprehension, suggesting that Sairoun 'would challenge Iran's political and economic spheres of influence in Iraq' and that its victory 'indicate[s] that anti-Iran plots are underway in Iraq.'[43] IRGC's Qassem Soleimani was present in Iraq immediately following the elections, and continued to be an ever-present force, applying pressure on the Shiʿi factions and the Sadr movement in particular to overcome their differences and reconstitute the sect-based Shiʿi alliance that would deliver a government capable of securing Iranian interests in Iraq.[44]

These pressures had a potentially violent and coercive dimension. In May, the ICP's headquarters in Baghdad were targeted by two IEDs, neither of which resulted in casualties. 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq was suspected of being behind the attack.[45] On 7 June, while negotiations between Sairoun and Fatah were taking place, a major explosion ripped through Sadr City killing eighteen and wounding a further ninety. According to security officials, the explosion resulted from an accidental detonation of a weapons cache in one of Sadr City's many mosques.[46] The implication was that Muqtada's militia had carelessly been stockpiling weapons in the city's mosques with disregard for the safety of its inhabitants. While this account is plausible, the timing of the explosion certainly made the incident suspect and perfectly calibrated to send a clear message to Muqtada that if he refused to fall into line IRGC could impose massive costs on him and his movement. A matter of days after the Sadr City explosion, on 12 June, Muqtada and Sairoun announced an agreement with Hadi al-'Ameri's Fatah alliance on the formation of a parliamentary bloc to enable government formation.[47]

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[43] Ahmad Majidyar, 'Muqtada al-Sadr's victory in Iraqi elections raises alarm in Tehran,' *Middle East Institute* May 21, 2018. https://www.mei.edu/publications/muqtada-al-sadrs-victory-iraqi-elections-raises-alarm-tehran

[44] 'Top Iranian general Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad 'to shape new government,' *The New Arab,* May 15, 2018. https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/5/15/top-iranian-general-in-baghdad-to-shape-new-government ; 'Iran's Soleimani holds talks about future Iraqi cabinet,' *Reuters,* May 16, 2018. https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-iraq-election-iran/irans-soleimani-holds-talks-about-future-iraqi-cabinet-idUKKCN1IH1HT

[45] 'ICP: Attack on headquarters due to party's role in forming government,' *The Baghdad Post,* May 25, 2018. https://www.thebaghdadpost.com/en/Story/27735/ICP-Attack-on-headquarters-due-to-party-s-role-in-forming-government

[46] 'Sadr condemns Baghdad 'bombing', orders committee to be formed,' *Rudaw,* June 7, 2018. https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/07062018 ; 'Explosion in Baghdad's Sadr City kills at least 18,' *ABC News*, June 7, 2018. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-06-07/baghdad-sadr-city-explosion-kills-at-least-18/9847040

[47] 'Al-Sadr difficult coalition government,' *ANF,* June 16, 2018. https://anfenglish.com/women/al-sadr-difficult-coalition-government-27483

Behind the scenes, the ICP had been desperately trying to resist this outcome. Helfi had told the author that while they recognised Fatah could not be excluded from the government, they were still working to try and secure the isolation of some of its more radical elements, such as 'Asa'ib (potentially explaining 'Asa'ib's attacks on the ICP). Faris Nadhmi, meanwhile, told the author that he hoped Sairoun would abandon the idea of forming a government and become an opposition force in parliament: 'I know it will be a very critical moment for the ICP if Muqtada is building such an alliance with Fatah. I think Sairoun is going to be an effective opposition rather than part of a semi-sectarian alliance.'[48]

However, as the ICP had only secured two seats via the Sairoun alliance, it had little leverage, on its own, to shape the alliance's strategic direction. Meanwhile, quitting Sairoun unilaterally would mean political irrelevance. The ICP was left, therefore, to try and put a brave face on what appeared to be a major strategic failure and political embarrassment. A statement from Secretary General Raed Fahmi read:

> From these meetings between Sairoun and Fatah, from which followed the announcement from Muqtada al-Sadr and Hadi al-'Ameri yesterday evening, came the formation of the largest bloc. And from the meetings of Sairoun and all its negotiations came confirmation of the commitment to the project of change and reform which satisfies the desire of the people and voters especially those who granted their trust to Sairoun and the goals it seeks to achieve.

This statement did little to quell the outrage and consternation, expressed not just by the ICP's detractors in the civil trend, but by the ICP's own cadres.[49] Helfi was reduced to releasing cryptic statements on social media pleading for patience and time and hinting that things were going on behind the scenes that would become clear later on.

In fact, Helfi could have been alluding to signals that the Sadrists were sending in private regarding their real position vis-à-vis Fatah. As it turns out, Muqtada seems to have once more found the wriggle room necessary to partially escape from the cage constructed for him by Soleimani, the IRGC and its Iraqi allies. His strategy seems to have been to buy time and thereby relieve some of the pressure on the Sadr movement. Thus, the accommodation between Muqtada and 'Ameri lasted just long enough to get 'Adil 'Abd al-Mahdi approved as Prime Minister, but gradually broke down thereafter. Muqtada strongly resisted Fatah's attempts to get Maliki and Iran ally Faleh al-Fayyad (then head of the Hashd al-Sha'bi

[48] Faris Kamal Nadhmi, follow-up discussions with the author via electronic communication, May 14, 2019.
[49] A younger generation of ICP cadres, such as Bahaa Kamal, began expressing their strong reservations about the alliance and its direction on social media.

Commission), appointed to the powerful Interior Minister position. Muqtada insisted the post, normally a Badr/ISCI appointment, go to an independent technocrat.[50] Thus, having pivoted briefly towards the orbit of the Shiʿi Islamist alliance, Muqtada then pivoted back and resumed his policy of recalcitrant antagonism. The IRGC seemed less capable than before of holding the fragmentation of its sect-based political alliance in Iraq at bay.

For the ICP, the rapid breakdown in the Muqtada-Fatah accommodation meant a temporary escape from the worst-case outcome for the Sairoun project. Nevertheless, the Muqtada-Fatah dynamic would continue to oscillate back and forth between forms of accommodation and antagonism. In this context, the concrete political gains from the alliance were meagre. Sairoun allowed for technocratic appointments to some of the ministerial portfolios that were accorded to the Sadrists in the informal power sharing arrangements (e.g. health, electricity, transportation). This meant, for example, that Luay al-Khateeb, a well-respected technocrat and independent political figure, was appointed as Electricity Minister.[51] However, the alliance had no power to force other factions to adopt a technocratic approach.

An editorial in the ICP's Tariq al-Sha'b, published on August 8, 2019, gave a fairly pessimistic assessment of the alliance's performance.[52] It noted widespread disappointment with its inability to tackle corruption and bring about political reform, while highlighting some specific successes achieved by the alliances MPs in securing budget amendments and more funding for education. Particularly disappointing, however, was the controversy over amendments to the election law. This revolved around efforts by the big parties and blocs to raise the divisor in Iraq's complex Sainte-Laguë electoral system from 1.4 to 1.9.[53] This was seen as a critical strategic issue for the ICP and civil trend parties. As Salam 'Ali told the author:

> This makes very difficult for smaller blocs to win any seats. This unjust amendment was supported by the big political blocs to ensure their total hegemony over local government and eliminate potential opposition from civil democratic forces.

The ICP had been hopeful that the Sadr movement would enable them to resist this change via the Sairoun alliance. Muqtada himself, in a speech at a mass rally, fiercely attacked the

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[50] 'Iraq's Sadr demands independent candidates for interior, defense ministers,' *Xinhua*, November 27, 2018. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-11/27/c_137635253.htm

[51] Khateeb has so far proved to be one of the success stories of the post-2018 government, increasing electricity provision in Basra.

[52] *Tariq al-Sha'b,* August 8. 2019.

[53] Kirk H. Sowell, 'Wrangling over Iraq's Election Laws,' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* April 20, 2017. https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/68730

proposed amendment, feeding this optimism.[54] However, in the event, the Sadr movement's Political Committee ordered its MPs within Sairoun to support the amendment, throwing the alliance into chaos and deepening despondency amongst the ICP and its civil trend allies. The Sadrists' explanation for their *volte face* was that resisting the amendment would mean delay in the forthcoming provincial elections allowing the incumbent parties to protect the status quo.

Nevertheless, the ICP persisted with the alliance, perhaps reflecting the real weakness of its position. The August 8 editorial in Tariq al-Sha'b concluded by stating:

> Our Party is still seeking to strengthen and develop the alliance so long as it remains respectful of the ideological and political independence of its members, and so long as the commitment of its parties remains to join political work that was stipulated in the alliance's programme, and has worked jointly to achieve these reformist goals.

However, there were signs that the alliance was beginning to disintegrate. The change in the electoral law altered the ICP's strategic calculations vis-à-vis the forthcoming provincial elections, and the Party began exploring the possibility of forming new ad hoc alliances with secularist and civil trend groups to compete at the provincial level. Nevertheless, the ICP's official position was that it remained committed to Sairoun as a framework for national politics. Salam 'Ali (ICP Central Committee), responding to rumours that the ICP and Sairoun were going separate ways in the provincial elections, was keen to set the record straight:

> Regarding the forthcoming provincial elections, the party has not yet finalised its position, whether it will enter into a big alliance (Sairoun) or a local coalition with democratic civil groups. The party is still committed to the alliance of Sairoun with the Sadrists, despite criticism about its performance in parliament, as well as the position taken by the Sadrists on the [election law] which the Party strongly opposed.

As the disappointments continued to accumulate for the both the civil trend, and its allies within the Sadr movement, the mood amongst those most involved in the alliance became increasingly gloomy.

The ICP had sacrificed the unity and coherence of the civil trend to pursue an ambitious political strategy. If the politics failed to deliver, this trade-off would have to be judged a critical mistake since it had diminished the capacities of the civil trend as a movement around which resistance to domination could be organised. However, prognostications vis-à-vis the alliance's political achievements were not optimistic, even amongst its most ardent

[54] Sowell, 'Wrangling over Iraq's Election Laws.'

supporters. Writing in the ICP's Taqriq al-Sha'b in August 2019, Faris Nadhmi, the intellectual architect of the leftist-Sadrist convergence, spelled out his own critique of the alliance's performance:

> Sairoun emerged from the popular movement of 2015 and became an extension of this movement… It is, in this characteristic, something new and extraordinary in our historical experience, representing the promise of reform at the hands of credible and competent political actors for the people who have lost confidence in the quota system [*niẓām al-muḥāṣaṣa*] and its politicians… We are not surprised by the severity of the people's judgement when it finds that the alliance's actions are not consistent with the priorities of the reform program of Sairoun. This was particularly clear in the exclusionary amendments to the provisional election law which the ICP rejected…In general, the Sairoun alliance remains more popular than others in serving the interests of our people, and in the rejection of the quota system. However, this confidence is vulnerable to decline unless it is reinforced by achievement and the adoption of the reform programme of the alliance to guide its work, both inside and outside parliament, to embrace to the concerns of citizens and defend their interests.[55]

The outbreak of major protests in October 2019, in which the civil trend and Sadrist leaderships were largely spectators not participants, clarified once more the distance that was growing between Sairoun as a political project and forms of popular politics and resistance taking place in spaces beyond the elite's control.

## V
## Conclusion

This chapter has explored the political and electoral alliance between the Iraqi left and the Sadr movement that emerged as the largest list from Iraq's May 2018 national elections. On the surface, Sairoun lil-Islah was a cross-ideological coalition that united the two movements in a project that was secular-liberal in its symbolic, ideological and programmatic politics. It claimed to be the political vehicle for the protest movement that erupted in 2015 and made the demand of those protests – ending the *muḥāṣaṣa ṭā'fiyya* and appointing technocratic ministers not beholden to the political parties – the centrepiece of its political programme. The alliance's manifesto connected these policies conceptually to the notion of a civil state (*al-dawla al-madaniyya*). The alliance presented its success as a victory for the protest movement and a turning point in Iraq's post-2003 history. This was pitched as a reorientation of Iraqi politics away from the failed Islamism of the governing

[55] Faris Kamal Nadhmi, 'Hopes and Challenges,' Tariq al-Sha'b*,* August 8, 2019.

elite and toward a reforming agenda that would transcend sectarian divisions, target corruption and deliver effective governance.

The reality was far more complex. The protest movement and the civil trend-Sadrist convergence were the door that opened up the possibility of a leftist-Sadrist political alliance. However, this alliance was not a natural or organic outgrowth of the protest movement, but primarily a form of horizontal intra-elite politics that supervened upon, and interacted with, popular politics and the social terrain of the civil trend in a highly strategic fashion. Vertical linkages between the ICP, the Sadrist leadership and the domains of popular politics were both weaker than claimed and often functioned as sites of social struggle. Thus, the alliance's claim to represent the protesters, and even the civil trend itself, was fiercely contested. Indeed, the formation of the alliance deepened preexisting fractures within both the protest movement and the civil trend, leading to an erosion of their momentum and neutering the rise of *madanī* politics as a collective framework for an ideologically secularist politics.

Moreover, the political alliance itself was not simply a case of two movements coalescing around a united ideological platform. Rather, the cooperation and accompanying rhetoric that characterised the surface layer of cross-movement interactions was underpinned by a more complex strategic game. This took the form of a Gramscian war of position in which the ICP sought to exploit fragmentation within the Shiʿi Islamist bloc and within the Sadr movement itself to fundamentally destabilise the Islamist's political hegemony. The Sadr movement, meanwhile, staked out positions of influence within the intellectual field, attempting to conquer parts of the 'traditional' intelligentsia in an effort to expand the hegemonic potential its politics. Thus, both movements were engaged in a war of position that targeted their coalition allies as much they targeted wider political groups and structures.

However, such strategic calculations were not the full story of the political alliance. Rather, these strategies were only made possible by the long-term social processes of transformation in the structures of the two movements, the development of a new Sadrist intellectual strata with distinct cultural and political perspectives and the emergence of a transgressive strain within the secular intelligentsia that sought to engage with the Sadr movement – socially and intellectually – and to search for possibilities for new forms of cross-ideological political cooperation. It was not only that these developments opened up dimensions of intra-movement struggle within these movements that presented strategic

openings for cross-movement interaction. Rather, or in addition to this, they created shared forms of identity, practices and contexts for action that were uncovered, and made more salient to movement actors, once they began strategically interacting.

This helps explain why those most deeply involved in the alliance's formation became 'true believers' in its potential to become more than a merely strategic relationship and to function, in itself, as a vehicle for transforming Iraqi politics. It also helps to explain why these actors developed respect and admiration for their cross-movement interlocutors and formed cross-movement friendships that proved more enduring than some of their intra-movement ties. The endurance of the alliance from its inception in 2015 up to the time of writing at the end of 2019, is partly explained by the strength of these ties. Nevertheless, the alliance fell far short of its most grandiose ambitions. In short, there were inherent weaknesses in the structures of the two movements, internal fragmentations and an inability to link up the necessary social elements in a truly counter-hegemonic project. At the same time, the political field and the logic of power around which it was organised, exerted a powerful pull that dragged the project of the leftist-Sadrist alliance from its inception as a strategy of resistance, toward collusion with the system it had sought to disrupt and dismantle.

# CONCLUSION

> …the realm of strategy is one of bargaining and persuasion as well as threats and pressure, psychological as well as physical effects, and words as well as deeds. This is why strategy is the central political art. It is about getting more out of a situation than the starting balance of power would suggest. It is the art of creating power.
>
> - Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy.*[1]

## Introduction

The final chapter of my thesis summarises its key arguments in four sections. The first, deals with the leftist-Sadrist alliance as a phenomenon of transformation. Here, I want to reiterate my central argument that the alliance was neither a case of two movements always primed for cooperation, nor a merely instrumental coalition brokered between political elites and without deeper social and cultural roots. I have argued that the alliance can only be understood as a phenomenon of transformation in both the social and ideological structures of the two movements and the social contexts in which they operated. The second section offers an assessment of the alliance as a strategic political project, providing answers to the central question of whether it functioned as a strategy of resistance or as a form of collusion. The third section looks beyond Iraq to draw out key theoretical conclusions from my research which touch on important scholarly domains in social movement theory and analyses of transformations of Islamist politics. Finally, I will present some concluding thoughts on the alliance and this research project as a whole in light of the violent suppression of mass protests in Iraq that occurred in October 2019.

## The Leftist Sadrist Alliance: A Phenomenon of Transformation

The leftist-Sadrist alliance was much more than an electoral bargain struck between a narrow group of political elites. It was a complex and strategic cross-ideological social

[1] Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), xii.

movement coalition with cultural and ideological as well as strictly political dimensions. It entailed highly contested coordination between forms of popular politics and different strata of civil society including activists, intellectuals, political parties, clerics and religious leaders. The process of coalition formation thus entailed forms of social struggle and cooperation on cultural and intellectual terrain and engaged a range of actors and forms of practice located outside the political field. This made the leftist-Sadrist alliance unique in Iraq's post-2003 politics which has been characterised by intra-elite bargains in which broader social strata and forms of practice have rarely been implicated.

The alliance also signalled a process of ideological transformation and strategic reorientation. The Sadrists emerged in 2003 as a movement anchored in the religious field and overwhelmingly dependent on religious-metaphysical (both Shiʿi religious and Sadr-centric) and coercive forms of capital. It sought to differentiate itself from Iraq's secular middle class and intelligentsia, and these latter groups perceived the Sadr movement as an existential threat to Iraq's secular cultural and political life. This was not merely a divergence in ideology or in political perspectives, but one rooted more fundamentally in contrasting forms of practice and contexts of action. By 2015, however, elements in these two groups were united in a social movement publicly organised not around religious, sectarian, or even Islamist symbols and ideas but those of the *madanī* politics of the previously marginalised Iraqi secular intelligentsia. The left's move toward alliance with the Sadr movement from 2015 was also a radical strategic pivot away from its previous approach of seeking to unify Iraq's secular-liberal and leftist forces behind a strictly secularist and anti-Islamist platform.

This thesis has explained these transformations in leftist and Sadrist social movement politics by focusing on the interaction of three dimensions of change: 1) slow-moving processes of socialisation and their effects of the formation of political subjects; 2); systemic social crises; and 3) transverse movement cleavages. The formation of political subjects and their strategies has been shown to relate, in part, to actors' participation in routine forms of practice that belong to particular sectors of the social world (intellectual, religious, political etc.), as well as their situation in relations of power within these domains. What has been uncovered are the creative strategies that emerged within various sites of marginality and subordination within the differentiated domains of civil society. This included: Sadrists routinely participating in the secular intellectual field; transgressive cultural practices emerging from the margins of the secular intelligentsia; and radical political strategies

adopted by relative outsiders within political domains who were seeking to overturn normative political practices and their boundaries of strategic possibility.

These political subjects and their more engrained dispositions and political perspectives did not determine the strategies pursued by actors. Rather, these embedded orientations interacted with, and were modulated through, more fluid structural contexts created by systemic social crises and transverse movement cleavages. Social crises had multiple effects that loosened sectoral logics, rendered group boundaries more permeable to tactical actions and allowed for creative strategies that sought to coordinate social action and resources across previously compartmentalised social domains. These crises often exacerbated transverse movement cleavages. However, intra-movement contestation of political strategies was also the product of more enduring intra- and inter-field-based struggles that preceded the onset of systemic crisis. The Sadr movement, in particular, was characterised by a diversity of strategic orientations that related to the movement's localisation across a structurally differentiated landscape of fairly autonomous social fields. Although more contained to the secular intelligentsia, the strategies of the civil trend were also shaped by intra-field dynamics of social struggle over questions of autonomy, politicisation, leadership, strategy and social status.

This analysis transforms current understanding of the civil trend and the Sadr movement. Neither has typically been approached as an internally contested domain of social and ideological struggle. By contrast, this thesis has revealed these social movements to be characterised by both greater cultural and ideological diversity and intra-movement contestation of their strategic politics. However, in both cases, the movements' institutional and organisational structures have contributed to an absence of ideological coherence and a characteristic instability in their strategic politics. For the civil trend, this reflects its amorphous and weakly-institutionalised framework for political action which has largely been created *ad hoc* in response to specific crises or events. For the Sadr movement, this instability has been a function primarily of the movement's weak horizontal forms of integration, lack of hierarchic institutionalisation, personalised mode of authority and weak central control over its various leadership strata. Muqtada's leadership has, consequently, consisted more by forms of inter- and intra-factional brokerage between different Sadrist groups with contrasting political perspectives and strategic interests, than in the imposition of a unitary strategic orientation on the movement from the top-down.

## Resistance or Collusion: Assessing the Leftist-Sadrist Alliance

The leftist-Sadrist alliance captured Iraqi socio-political dynamics in a new light by revealing capacities for resistance to political domination and for strategic counter-hegemonic struggle that had not been anticipated. This confounded widely held notions of a fragmented and 'conflict-strewn' society, permeated by traditional or primordial forms of segmented social organisation, that was elite-dependent and prone to irrational and emotional outbursts of chaotic social unrest. However, the alliance's limitations, particularly as a political project, illustrated that resistance and power are inextricably bound together. A strategic project that conceived itself as counter-hegemonic was thus also shaped by dynamics of co-optation, collusion and elite manipulation. Its protagonists became enmeshed in the same social logics of power they had set out to disrupt and destroy. This revealed the limits of resistance and clarified the ways in which power in Iraq has been contested and sustained amid critical social crises.

This dual character of opposition and collusion is inherent to strategies of resistance. Laurence Freedom has described strategy as '…the central political art. It is about getting more out of a situation than the starting balance of power would suggest. It is the art of creating power.'[2] Strategy is, *a fortiori*, the central art by which marginalised and dominated groups fashion power within interlocking systems of domination. At the same time, this makes power the inescapable counterpart to strategies of resistance. Strategic political agency can never be about eluding power, since, as Foucault has emphasised, '[w]herever there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather by the same token, the latter is never external to power.'[3] From this perspective, the line between resistance and collusion, and between opposition and co-optation, becomes blurred and more difficult to parse. And this is as it should be, since construing the leftist-Sadrist alliance as *either* a strategy of opposition and resistance, *or* as an aspect of elite instrumentalisation, co-optation and collusion, would be to miss how the alliance was a complex social phenomenon constituted by elements of both. It would also misconstrue the way political power in Iraq has been created, sustained and contested.

Thus, while the leftist-Sadrist alliance presented itself as a radical challenge to the political system and as engaged in a complex and strategic war of position, its detractors

[2] Freedman, *Strategy*, xii.
[3] Tripp, *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 11.

conceived the alliance's purpose, or the effects of its operation, not as challenging but as reinforcing extant political hegemony. Many of the alliance's protagonists forwarded a Gramscian framework to explicate and justify their political strategy. However, this thesis has deployed Bourdieusian and Dobryian interpretative frameworks. These different lenses reveal contrasting aspects of the leftist-Sadrist alliance as a form of counter-hegemonic struggle. It is, therefore, worth discussing the alliance in light of these different theories and what they can illuminate about the nature of resistance, collusion and the practice of power in Iraq.

The leftist-Sadrist alliance, particularly – though not exclusively – in the eyes of its leftist protagonists, was conceived in Gramscian terms as a war of position whose ultimate purpose was the formation of a new historical bloc. In this view, the strategic challenge to hegemony decentres the state in favour of superstructural elements which 'correspond to the defensive systems in a war of position.'[4] This Gramscian lens captures important features of the leftist-Sadrist alliance and the nature of the challenge it posed to the Iraqi political system. Perhaps most important, it helps to reveal how this challenge incorporated elements of social struggle over cultural as well as political terrain. This began with the Sadr movement's cultural turn in 2009 and the movement's greater engagement in Iraq's secular intellectual field and continued through the negotiation and mediation of the civil trend-Sadrist convergence which occurred primarily on the social terrain of the intelligentsia. In the Gramscian terms of the alliance's protagonists, this was seen as bringing together 'traditional' and 'organic' intellectual strata, with the former shaping the emerging political subjectivity of the latter.

The notion of a war of position also helps to clarify the political aspect of the leftist-Sadrist alliance which was more ambitious than many realised. From the left's perspective, alliance with the Sadr movement specifically was the *raison d'être* of this strategic project. It was thus intended not merely to fragment the enemy's political alliance but to disrupt the underlying social logic of power around which it was organised and in which the political system as a whole was anchored. This is how a senior ICP strategist explained their thinking to the author: 'If we can join the Sadrists to us, and thereby weaken the Shiʿi alliance and render it unstable, then if the Shiʿi alliance is weak, the system as a whole will be shaken.' The alliance's detractors, who saw the ICP's actions as merely reactive and

[4] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* trans. eds. Geoffrey Nowell Smith & Quintin Hoare (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2003), 235.

opportunistic, risked obscuring the strategic impetus behind the ICP's behaviour. This view also underestimated the degree to which the intellectual ground for the coalition was primed prior to the Sadr movement's initial formal requests for a political alliance.

On the other hand, the Iraqi left seldom used the same Gramscian framework to consider how the Sadr movement might also be waging a war of position against them to advance its own hegemony, yet this reading is quite plausible. Gramsci argued that: 'One of the most important characteristics of any group that is developing towards dominance is its struggle to assimilate and to conquer "ideologically" the traditional intellectuals.'[5] Owing to the Sadr movement's messianic mode of religious mobilisation, it was uniquely lacking in power within these cultural and ideological domains. Thus, staking out positions of influence in the intellectual field could be construed as a strategic war of position to strengthen and advance Sadrist political hegemony. The value of this strategy from the Sadrist perspective lay in acquiring ideological resources required for professional politics and forms of symbolic legitimation that transcended the constraints of the movement's own Shiʿi Islamist and Sadr-centric symbolic repertoire.

However, the value of this Gramscian interpretative lens is ultimately limited. One reason lies in how it tends to reduce cultural practices to an instrumental logic that pays less attention to the more slow-moving processes of socialisation, routinization and habituation. Rather than describe a merely strategic-instrumental interaction between the cultural and intellectual strata of the civil trend and the Sadr movement, this thesis has sought to unpack the social context of these interactions as a particular sector of the intellectual field. In this view, the emergence of new cultural and political perspectives and ideological frameworks was not a function primarily of tactical or calculated decisions by movement actors (choosing 'frames' that 'resonated' with a target audience), but of pathways of socialisation and engagement in forms of practice that generated new social identities and political perspectives.

A Gramscian lens also risks overstating the internal ideological coherence and stability in the strategic politics of the two movements. This results from the way a Gramscian framework assumes an unproblematic translation of the political subjectivity of the 'organic intellectuals' into the social bases from which they are thought to emerge, and within which they are conceived as remaining fundamentally engaged (hence, 'organic,'). By contrast,

[5] Gramsci, *Selections,* 10.

what emerges from this thesis is a more Bourdieusian picture of intellectual life as a fairly autonomous sphere of action. Thus, the practices of Sadrist cultural and intellectual strata were located primarily within a distinct sector of social space wherein they gained relative autonomy both from the social bases of the movement and its other leadership strata. Consequently, transformations in the ideological and political perspectives of this group did not translate straightforwardly to other parts of the movement.

The evident limitations of the leftist-Sadrist alliance, the ways in which it fell short of its own strategic objectives, prompt questions about the nature of political power and systemic resilience in Iraq. The conditions of social crisis that converged in 2015 (violent insurgency, popular mobilisations, intra-elite cleavages, economic crisis) seemed to point towards a critical moment for the Iraqi political system. Moreover, this system was anchored in weak and incoherent state institutions with low levels of normative legitimacy amongst the governed. It then faced a challenge from a cross-ideological social movement coalition that succeeded in allying a key component of the elite bloc to its own counter-hegemonic struggle. How does a political system survive this sort of challenge, not only relatively unscathed, but even largely unchanged? Two forms of explanation have been offered in this thesis: the first, rooted in the internal dynamics of the protest movement and its political dimension; the second, rooted in the nature of power in Iraq and the ways in which it is contested and reproduced.

The Iraqi political field appeared vulnerable to a counter-hegemonic challenge owing to intra-elite fragmentation. However, the forces that rose to challenge this hegemony were also internally divided. The ICP sought to play the role of welding all the different social groups together. However, it was not effective in this function: it failed to bring together the different forms of popular politics into a coherent framework; it failed to convince the secular intelligentsia to attach itself to the project (only limited number of intellectuals like Faris Nadhmi and Faleh ‘Abd al-Jabar supported the alliance); and it failed to unite the civil trend’s activist leadership or its political dimension (most civil trend activists and secular-oriented political parties withdrew from the alliance). In part, this can be attributed to the ICP’s organisational weaknesses and the fragmentary effects of extreme violence, occupation and civil war on Iraqi society. However, many of the intra-movement cleavages explored here do not require recourse to such extraordinary events to explain. Rather, they are explicable as a function of routine forms of conflict and struggle that are inherent features of more mundane social life. In other words, it is not always necessary to reach for the exceptional conditions of war, or to primordial or traditional forms of social

segmentation, to explain patterns of social conflict that are more universally characteristic of social reality.

Irrespective of this internal fragmentation of the counter-hegemonic forces, the Iraqi political system was also not as weak and vulnerable as it appeared. Iraq was not a 'primordial' society in which an underdeveloped civil society allowed for a successful war of manoeuvre, the social conditions which Gramsci envisaged in which '*the State was everything*.' Quite the contrary, it was Iraq's modernity, described here as the complexification and sectorization of Iraqi civil society, that helps explain the resilience of its political system. In this view, the institutional weakness of the Iraqi state became an augmenting factor in the resilience of the political system as a whole. This weakness was a condition for the dispersal of forms of legitimacy within a complex and structurally differentiated civil society. The weaker the Iraqi state, the more dispersed and elusive became the ultimate sources of the political system's power, and the more effective civil society became in buttressing the system's ability to resist challenges, particularly those which took the state and its institutions as their object.

The receding importance of the Iraqi state to the political system was repeatedly shown. Protesters in Basra and other southern provinces stormed, ransacked and burnt provincial government buildings, physically destroying the state's political and administrative institutions in the periphery. In Baghdad, protesters stormed the Iraqi parliament building, briefly seizing control of what was ostensibly the heart the system's political power. But the political system and its governing elite remained unshaken, as though, as Gramsci writes: 'the defenders are not demoralised, nor do they abandon their positions, even among the ruins, nor do they lose faith in their own strength or their own future.'[6] The leftist-Sadrist alliance itself was most effective and destabilising to political hegemony where it engaged in forms of cultural and ideological struggle, i.e. when it targeted the defensive systems in a war of position, and least effective and most prone to co-optation when it targeted the state directly via the political field.

This resilience in the political system can be understood when by decentring the Iraqi state and focusing instead on the complex web of relations that connects a diversity of elite actors located in the differentiated and autonomous fields of Iraqi civil society in the collusive exchanges of horizontal legitimation. As Dobry argues, '[t]he mainspring of these

[6] Gramsci, *Selections,* 235.

exchanges is not necessarily any adhesion to common values or common beliefs.'[7] In fact, it can arise from strategic logics that belong properly to a specific field, from tactical calculations, or simply from processes of routinization and habituation. They can also arise despite conscious efforts to prevent such exchanges taking place on the part of one or more parties to the exchange (e.g. the exchanges of legitimation between the *marja'iyya* and the paramilitary groups in the field of violence). This dynamic increasingly shaped the leftist-Sadrist alliance. As the movement became internally disconnected from broader social formations, its protagonists found themselves adrift and entangled in collusive transactions with the same political groups and forces they had set out to marginalise and defeat. Those who had sought to mobilise the symbolic capital of intelligentsia and the protest movement within a new political framework found that these resources had been co-opted into revivifying the political system by recalibrating the networks of intra-elite collusive exchanges upon which it rested.

## Beyond Iraq: Further Theoretical Conclusions

My research has theoretical implications beyond the field of Iraq studies and I have made the case for reintegrating Iraq into broader domains of comparative literature, particularly those addressing social movements and the Arab Spring and the study in Islamist political movements, from which it has been curiously absent. The penultimate section of my thesis presents theoretical conclusions which contribute to these areas.

### *Social Movement Coalitions*

Social movement coalitions have emerged as an important topic of research within SMT. Scholars regard coalition politics as a site of strategic agency wherein individuals and groups find creative ways to form alliances which advance their goals. Political process theory/Dynamics of Contention has been the dominant approach. Thus, explanatory power is said to lie with so-called 'environmental factors' (political opportunity structures and external threats); which combine with shared identity and ideological 'frames' ('ideological compatibility and shared collective identity promote coalitions'); leaders who 'play an important role in overcoming ideological barriers by framing issues so that a variety of

[7] Dobry, 'Critical processes,' 10.

groups can connect their concerns to a master frame;' and relational mechanisms (brokerage).[8] I have outlined weaknesses in this model, rooted primarily in its underlying social ontology and bias towards instrumental modes of social action. These theoretical arguments are clarified by the empirical case of the leftist-Sadrist alliance.

First, the formation of political subjects in this case was shaped by complex historical forces and relations of power. Of particular note were: the effects of modernity and its complexification Iraq's social landscape; the sectoral political of the Baʿthist state and systemic social crises engendered by invasion; occupation and civil war. These forces shaped the strategic politics of Iraq's secularist, leftist and Islamist social movements in profound ways that cannot be re-represented in terms of structures of opportunities, threats, cultural frames, or positionality in networks of social ties. Nor can they be grasped within the foreshortened time-scale that these analytical concepts tend to impose.

Second, leftist-Sadrist coalition politics emerged from a reciprocal interaction between 'strategic agency' characterised by conscious, tactical calculation and a deeper substrate of dispositions and orientations that emerged from practices that were routinised, habituated and embodied. Moreover, the strategic perspective and the tactical calculations which actors made were not a case of eluding determining structures, and thus acting with greater rationality and autonomy, but was itself a mode of subjectivity with a socio-structural correlate (desectorisation). This adoption of particular discourses and symbols was not merely a matter of tactical calculation, but reflected both longer-term process of cultural transformation born in social action and alterations in social structures caused by crises that threw actors into a different type of relationship with the social world.

Third, this thesis has not taken aspects of social embeddedness between the left and the Sadr movement as the explanans for social movement coalition formation. Rather, it has sought to unpack how and why this greater degree of social integration emerged. Primarily, this explanation has homed in on the Sadr movement's cultural turn in 2009 and how this interacted with a transgressive strain within the secular intelligentsia to create new social ties, identities and cultural and political perspectives. These horizontal social linkages between the certain strata of the two movements allowed for broader and more ambitious forms of strategic political cooperation from 2015. A comparison with the cross-movement interactions between the civil trend and 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, clarified this dynamic, showing

[8] Nella Van Dyke and Holly J. McCammon, *Strategic Alliances: Coalition Building and Social Movements* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 320-324.

that where tactical-instrumental logics are not reinforced by more deep-seated and less contingent socio-structural forces, will be more fragile and more limited in scope (a narrower range of perceived strategic possibilities).

Finally, the leftist-Sadrist alliance presents a problem for the widely-held notion that coalition formation is strongly predicted by shared identities, shared ideological frameworks and dense social ties. Both the left and the Sadr movement broke away from preexisting alliances with whom they shared more of all these features than they did with their new coalition partners. In fact, whether sociological and ideological proximities encourage cooperation or conflict is highly situational, with plausible logics running in both directions. Moreover, the centrality of proximities (in networks and ideological 'frames') in conventional theories, entails that competition and conflict flow primarily from the absence of these same elements. This suggests a dichotomization of cooperative and conflictual aspects of social action, obscuring their dialectical relationship. Consequently, the importance of unarticulated and unacknowledged forms of social struggle that are implicit in domains of shared practice can be obscured when the network, rather than the deeper structure of the social field which shapes the surface pattern of nodes and ties, is taken be ontologically primary.

### *Moderation and Ideological Transformation of Islamist Groups*

The Sadr movement fits poorly within a model of ideological transformation which regards moderation as flowing from adaptation or learning in response to political inclusion. First, because notion's like 'moderation' or other terms denoting paradigmatic shifts (e.g. Islamism to post-Islamism) overstate the internal coherence of Sadrist ideology and the nature of its transformation. And second, because the Sadrists' involvement in democratic politics from 2005 did not abate its use of violence, but exacerbated it in certain contexts while reducing it in others.

Recent trends that identify paradigmatic transformations in Islamist politics risk overstating the internal coherence of particular movements and downplaying the effects of more localised structures and organisational features through which ideological change is modulated. Consequently, transformations come to be seen as homogenous and linear movements from one set of ideas and strategic orientations to another. The experience of Iraq's Sadr movement joins a growing number of empirical case studies that cast doubt on such characterisations. These reveal that more localised structures give rise to greater

heterogeneity in terms of interests and political outlooks within Islamist movements and that ideological transformations thus tend to be unevenly distributed across different movement strata giving rise to competing interests and greater contestation of strategic practices. The localisation of the Sadr movement's various leadership strata in distinct social sites has also manifest in weak horizontal social ties between the movement's diverse leadership strata. The movement's strategic political behaviour emerges from a persistent struggle between these competing factions in which Muqtada acts as mediator and broker. Consequently, it makes little sense to talk of Sadrist moderation or broad ideological transformation since this would overstate both the overall coherence and stability of the movement's ideology and strategic politics.

Attention to local contexts and their effects on ideological transformation also casts doubt on broad theoretical propositions such as those which connect political inclusion with moderation. In the Sadrist case, political inclusion did not reduce the movement's violence but transferred this violence to different contexts. Thus, it played a role in dissipating the movement's use of violence in the religious field, but it also inserted the Sadr movement into more intense forms of competition, and violence, with rivals in the political field. What matters in terms of the effects attached to political inclusion are the forms of capitals circulating in the political field. In the Iraqi case, while democratic in its formal structures, coercive capital was a central currency of power in politics. It is not surprising then that deeper political engagement acted to intensify competition over coercive capital between the Sadr movement and its Shiʿi Islamist rivals in these contexts.

## Final Thoughts

This thesis has engaged with the lives and struggles of Iraqis from diverse backgrounds engaged in forms of resistance to, and collusion with, a political system that has proven remarkably enduring and impervious to popular demands for reform. The frustrated hopes and disappointments that followed the victory of Sairoun in May's 2018 elections left many of the alliance's protagonists demoralised and despondent about their role in Iraqi politics and the future of the country. However, even as Sairoun receded as an important political entity, the pervasive disillusionment and discontent with the status quo continued to find expression in forms of popular politics. In the summer of 2018 and in October 2019, tens of thousands of Iraqis again took to the streets in demonstrations against an immovable and

irreformable political oligarchy suffocating the country. Hundreds were killed and thousands wounded in brutal repression meted out to protesters from state and non-state forces.[9]

Iraq appeared set on a trajectory towards a more authoritarian future where a diverse and amorphous security apparatus would use violence and coercion to hold back the anger of a rising generation of young Iraqis with thwarted dreams.[10] The direct confrontation between angry youths and the Iraqi state and paramilitaries presaged more chaos, violence and suffering. What the protests lacked was a political framework and strategic direction. However, the forces who previously sought to provide these functions (the civil trend, the ICP and the Sadr movement) were discredited and rejected by many protesters as parties to the corruption and collusive transactions that sustained the elites. Some amongst this rejected and demoralised older generation of activists and politicians seemed to accept their leadership role had run its course. Jassim al-Helfi, for instance, following October's protests, released a message via his social media accounts which stated:

> The blood of the young people shed in a single day says clearly and definitively that the path of the political process is closed and there is no hope in it, and stresses that the approach of party politics provides no way out and no hope. The young people today broke open another path, the path of dignity. Theirs is the decision and choice for mapping a new road to salvation.[11]

Nevertheless, while the protests fulfilled a cathartic function by creating brief moments of resistance, without a coherent political strategy and political representation they offered little hope of change. Rather, these moments of resistance ultimately served to clarify the naked coercive power through which the Iraqi political system now ultimately sustained its authority.

This coming together of popular politics and coercive repression also created a new and dangerous situation for the Sadrists. As the movement's base mobilised in street protests across the south and in Baghdad, they encountered extreme violence from Iranian-backed paramilitary groups such as 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Badr, Kata'ib al-Imam 'Ali and Saraya al-Khorasani. In response, the Sadr movement's own militia, Saraya al-Salam, mobilised to protect, and revenge, Sadrist protesters. Convoys of Saraya al-Salam militiamen circled

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[9] Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, 'Live mapping Iraq's October protests across the south,' *Iraq After Occupation,* October 2, 2019. https://www.iraqafteroccupation.com/2019/10/02/live-mapping-iraqs-october-protests-across-the-south/

[10] Benedict Robin-D'Cruz and Renad Mansour, 'The Basra Blueprint and the Future of Protest in Iraq,' *Chatham House,* October 8, 2019. https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/basra-blueprint-and-future-protest-iraq

[11] Jassim al-Helfi, *Twitter/Facebook,* October 2, 2019.

Baghdad's Tahrir Square ahead of major protests on 25 October. When 'Asa'ib's militiamen opened fire on Sadrist protesters in Maysan, Saraya al-Salam gunmen retaliated, killing two of 'Asa'ib's fighters. Leaders of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi militias, such Qais al-Khaza'li and Hadi al-'Ameri, responded by pointing to a US-Israeli conspiracy to sow discord and instability in Iraq, and signalled their preparedness to use violence in response to protests targeting their groups.[12]

This militarisation of popular politics, i.e. the bringing of coercive capital from the field of violence into the domain of protests, radically transformed the stakes of these fields. In 2015, the Sadrists had engaged in a largely peaceful protest movement and thereby participated in the creation of new forms of politics and national mythologies distinct from those associated with the Hashd al-Sha'bi. By October 2019, the relative autonomy of these two spheres of action was collapsing as coercive resources were used to close off spaces for resistance to political domination. For the Sadr movement, this loss of autonomy for the sphere of popular politics, and the insertion of Shiʿi paramilitary groups into this space, opened up a further front of direct competition with these groups. This presaged new forms of conflict and struggle that would be structured primarily by the practice of violence.

[12] Sheikh Qais al-Khaza'li and Hadi al-'Ameri, October 26, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aoNunY-xe4M&feature=youtu.be

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Several interviews and discussions were conducted by the author with senior ICP and Sadr movement figures on condition of anonymity. In some cases, interviewees requested that specific passages from their interviews only be quoted anonymously, while other sections could be attributed publicly. In such cases, only the year of the interview is given to avoid identification of the interviewee via cross-referencing with other bibliographic entries.

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# APPENDIXES

# Appendix I
# Key Sadr movement actors 2003-2009

| NAME | FUNCTION | SOCIAL BACKGROUND | SOCIAL TIES/NOTES |
|---|---|---|---|
| **AYATOLLAH MUHAMMAD BAQIR AL-SADR (B. APRIL 9, 1980)** | Senior Ayatollah and intellectual figure in Shi'i Islamist politics. Priestly pole of Sadr movement. | Hawza, Najaf. | Cousin of Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr. Daughters married sons of Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr including Muqtada's wife. Father of Ja'far al-Sad (brother of Muqtada's wife). |
| **AYATOLLAH MUHAMMAD MUHAMMAD SADEQ AL-SADR (SADR II) (D. FEBRUARY 19, 1999)** | Marja' for Sadrist movement (taqlid al-mayt). Prophetic pole of Sadr movement. | Hawza, Najaf. | Father of Muqtada al-Sadr, cousin of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. Remains a source of emulation for some Sadr followers via unorthodox practice known as taqlid al-mayit (emulation of the dead). |
| **AYATOLLAH KAZEM HUSSEINI AL-HA'IRI** | Designated one source of emulation for Sadr trend by Sadeq al-Sadr. | Hawza, Najaf, later in Qom. | Student of Baqir al-Sadr. Born in Karbala Iraq, went into exile in Qom (Iran) in 1970s and remained in Qom. |
| **MUQTADA AL-SADR** | Preeminent leader of Sadr movement in Iraq. Controls his Private Office in Najaf, AKA the Office of the Martyr al-Sadr (OMS) | Hawza, Najaf | Fourth son of Sadr II. Brother of Murtada al-Sadr. Uncle of Ahmad al-Sadr. Brother-in-law of Sheikh Riyad al-Nouri. Father of adopted son Hisham al-Sadr. |
| **MURTADA AL-SADR** | No active role. | Hawza, Najaf. | Only other surviving son of Sadr II. Extremely reclusive. Lives in Iran. |
| **JA'FAR MUHAMMAD BAQIR AL-SADR** | Iraqi politician but dissociated from Sadr movement. | Hawza, Najaf | Only son of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. Cousin of Muqtada al-Sadr. Muqtada is married to Ja'far's sister. |
| **AHMED AL-SADR** | Political Committee (OMS) | Non-hawza. | Muqtada's nephew. Became a more prominent Sadrist political operative from around 2015. |

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| **SAYYID NUR AL-DIN ASHHURI** | Official representative of Ayatollah al-Ha'iri after Sadr II's death. | Iranian, but studied at the hawza in Najaf. | |
| **SHEIKH MOHAMMAD AL-FARTOUSI** | Ayatollah al-Ha'iri's representative at the Hikmah mosque, Sadr City. | Hawza, Najaf. | Reported to Shiekh Riyad al-Nouri at Muqtada Private Office in Najaf. |
| **AYATOLLAH MOHAMMAD AL-YA'QUBI** | Took control of OMS Najaf office after Sadr II assassination. Declared himself Ayatollah, split from Muqatada in 2003. | Hawza, Najaf | Prominent pupil of Sadr II. Founded Hizb al-Fadhila (Islamic Virtue Part) July 16, 2003. Strongest in Basra. Won 15 seats in 2005 elections. From Sadr City. |
| **AYATOLLAH KAMAL AL-HAYDARI** | Influential cleric in Sadr movement, influence declined once he went into exile in Qom. | Hawza, Najaf, later Qom. | Pupil of Sadr II. Went into exile in Kuwait and Syria in the 1980s. Eventually ended up in Qom, Iran. |
| **AYATOLLAH FADIL AL-MALIKI** | Senior Sadr trend cleric. | Hawza, Najaf | Went into exile in Qom, Iran. |
| **SHEIKH MUSTAFA AL-YA'QUBI** | Senior Sadrist cleric. One of Muqtada's closest advisers, his "right hand". Controlled Sadr movement finances. Financial liaison with Iran. Main contact to Lebanese Hezbolla via Shaykh Muhammad al-Kawtharini (also from Najaf Hawza). | Hawza, Najaf | Prominent pupil of Sadr II. One of the inner circle who kept Sadr movement alive between 1999-2003. |
| **SHEIKH MUHAMMAD TABATABA'I** | Senior Sadr movement cleric. At one stage khatib al-juma' at Kufa Mosque. | Hawza, Najaf | Prominent pupil of Sadr II. From Sadr City. Second most influential religious figure in Sadr movement. One of the inner circle who kept Sadr movement alive between 1999-2003. Mid-2006 delivered Friday sermon, known as "The Speech of the Calf," at Kufa Mosque which criticised Muqtada. Precipitated split with Muqtada. Ally of Qais al-Khaza'li, became Secretary General of AAH. |
| **SHEIKH RIYAD AL-NOURI (D. 2008)** | Senior Sadr movement cleric. Head of OMS Najaf/Muqtada's Private Office. Close | Hawza (Najaf) | Muqtada's brother-in-law. Prominent pupil of Sadr II. One of the inner circle who kept Sadr movement alive between 1999-2003. In 2008, Nouri authored a letter to |

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| | aid/confidant of Muqtada. Top cleric in Sadr movement post-2003. | | Muqtada calling for JAM to be disbanded and to rid the movement of extremists. Shortly afterwards, Nouri was assassinated by gunmen near his home in Najaf as he returned from Friday prayers on April 11, 2008. |
| **SHEIKH ADNAN AL-SHAHMANI** | Senior Sadr movement cleric in Muqtada's Najaf office. | Hawza, Najaf. | Influential in middle Iraq, Kut and Hillah. Left the Sadr movement and became close with Nouri al-Maliki/Da'wa Party. |
| **SHEIKH QAIS AL-KHAZA'LI** | Sadr movement cleric. One of Muqtada's closest advisers post-2003. Founding member of OMS. At one stage in charge of financing, construction, and operation of all OMS offices in Iraq. Head of Military Committee for JAM and Special Groups (SGs) until removed by Muqtada. | Bachelor's degree in geology Hawza, Najaf. | Pupil of Sadr II. Met Muqtada when they were both students at the Hawza in Najaf in 1995. Split from Muqtada in 2006. Captured by British SAS in March 2007. |
| **LAYTH AL-KHAZA'LI** | Became senior commander in AAH. | | Brother of Qais al-Khaza'li. |
| **SHEIKH JABAR AL-KHAFAJI** | Senior Sadr movement cleric. Succeeded Khaz'ali as joint-head of Military Committee for JAM and SGs alongside Sheikh Muhammad al-Asadi. | Hawza, Najaf | Pupil of Sadr II. One of the inner circle who kept Sadr movement alive between 1999-2003. |
| **SHEIKH AHMAD SHAIBANI** | Close aid and confidant of Muqtada. Spokesperson for Muqtada during Battle of Najaf. Popular khatib al-jum'a during the time of the late Muhammad al-Sadr. | Hawza, Najaf. Teacher at Najaf hawza. | Student of Sadr II. Accompanied MAS on first official visit in Iran in June 2003. Arrested by CF but released in March 2007 in effort to empower moderating elements in the movement. Split with Muqtada. |
| **SHEIKH MUHAMMAD AL-SA'DI** | Senior Sadr movement cleric. Succeeded Khaz'ali as joint-head of Military Committee for JAM and SGs. Khatib al-juma' at Kufa Mosque. | Hawza, Najaf | Worked alongside Sheikh Jabar al-Khafaji on Military Committee. |
| **HAIDDER MUSTAFA AKA ABU AYA** | JAM Financial Controller (OMS) | | Funding of both JAM and the Special Groups was routed through Abu Aya. |
| **SHEIKH AKRAM AL-KA'BI** | Commander in Chief of JAM, intermittently until May 2007. | Hawza, Najaf, minimal level. | Native of al-'Amarah. Very young when he rose to prominence as an effective JAM commander during the Battle of Najaf in 2004. Brought to prominence via relationship with Abu Muhammad Shibl. Splits from Muqtada and forms Harakat al-Nujaba'. |
| **SHEIKH ADNAN FAYAHN AL-DULAYMI AKA ABU MUHAMMAD** | Commander, JAM (central Iraq). Became an MP for AAH. | Hawza, Najaf. | Leader of the Sadr movement Special Groups for the central Iraq (Diwaniyah, Karbala, Hillah, and Najaf, Iraq). Split with Muqtada and joined AAH. |

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| **SHEIKH SALAH AL-'UBAYDI** | Close aid and confidant of Muqtada. Spokesperson for Sadr Movement. | Hawza, Najaf. | Close friend of Mustafa al-Ya'qubi Arrested by CF, released in 2007 as part of effort to empower moderating elements within Sadrist trend. Important role in the leftist-Sadrist alliance. |
| **SHEIKH MUHAMMAD AL-ABOUDI** | | Hawza, Najaf | Important cleric involved in leftist-Sadrist interactions. |
| **SHEIKH ASA'D AL-NASRI** | Close aid to Muqtada, part of his inner circle. | Hawza, Najaf | Played an important role in leftist-Sadrist interactions. |
| **SHEIKH MAHMOUD AL-JIYASHI** | Head of Muqtada's Private Office. Responsible for Muqtada's website. | Hawza, Najaf. | Fired in 2016. |
| **'ABD AL-MAHDI AL-MUTAYIRI AKA ABU FIRAS AL-MUTAYIRI** | Head of Political Committee (OMS) | Non-hawza.<br>Lawyer by training. | Brother of Sheikh Ahmad al-Mutayiri. |
| **SHEIKH SUHAYL AL-IQABI** | Deputy of Political Committee (OMS) | Hawza, Najaf. | |
| **SHEIKH HAZIM AL-'ARAJI** | Senior Sadr movement cleric post-2003. Head of Social Affairs Committee (OMS) Ran Kadimiyah wing of Jaysh al-Mahdi as semi-autonomous militia. | Hawza, Najaf. | Brother of Sadr movement politician Bahaa al-'Araji. Based in Baghdad. |
| **BAHA AL-'ARAJI** | Political, important Sadr trend MP. Led Sadr trend in parliament. Served as Deputy Prime Minister from Sept 2014-2015. | Non-Hawza. | Brother of Sheikh Hazim al-'Araji. Expelled from Sadr movement after corruption probe. |

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| **SHEIKH WALID AL-ZAMILI** | Aid and close confidant of Muqtada. Assumed some functions abdicated by Khaz'ali when he split from Muqtada. | Hawza, Najaf and later Damascus. | Fled to Syria following Sadr II assassination. Pupil of Sayed Abdul Aala Sabzawari al- Mussawi not Sadr II, according to Khaza'li this means he is not fully trusted by Muqtada and reportedly has a fractious relationship with Mustafa al-Ya'cubi. Resided in al-Sham area of Syria near the Shrine of Lady Zaynab. Attended hawza there. Knows Sheikh Walid al-Kraymawi from time in Syria. |
| **JALIL AL-NURI** | Jaysh al-Mahdi, connections with Hezbollah, connected to security training. | Operational background. | 2017 – Kazem Issawi split, and now in Lebanon. |
| **SHEIKH AOUN AL-NABI** | Became one of Muqtada's inner circle of close advisers. | Hawza, Najaf | Expelled from the movement unexpectedly in May 2019. |
| **HAIDAR AL-JABERI** | Very close to Muqtada, advisor to Muqtada. | Hawza, Najaf. | Close friend with Muqtada from before 2003. Split from Muqtada and left for Europe and Lebanon in 2016. |
| **SHEIKH 'ABD AL-AZAHRA AL-SUWAYDI** | OMS (Najaf) | Hawza, Najaf. | From Sadr City. |
| **SHEIKH 'ABD AL-HADI AL-DARRAJI** | OMS (Najaf) | Hawza, Najaf. | |
| **SHEIKH WALID AL-KURAYMAWI** | Member of Political Committee (OMS). Oversight of MPs and ministry officials belonging to the Sadr trend, | Hawza, Najaf, and later Damascus. | Pupil of Sadr II. Fled to Syria following Sadr II assassination, resided in al-Sham area of Syria near the Shrine of Lady Zaynab. Attended hawza there. Knows Sheikh Walid al-Zamili from their time together in Syria. |
| **SALAM AL-MALIKI** | Political. Held posts as Transport Minister, Minister of Labour, and Planning Ministry. | Non-hawza. | Split with Muqtada and joined Khaza'li faction. |

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| **NASSAR AL-RUBA'I** | In 2019 acted as head of political Committee (OMS). Important Sadr movement MP. Head of Sadr movement political bloc prior to Dhia al-Asadi. Currently head of Sadrist political committee (2019) | Non-hawza. | |
| **FALAH HASSAN AL-SHINAYSHIN** | Important Sadr movement MP. | Non-hawza. | |
| **'ADIL MUHODER** | Governor of al-'Amarah. Held Minister of Labour position. | Non-hawza. | |
| **SHEIKH AHMAD AL-MUTAYIRI** | Political Committee (OMS) | Hawza, Najaf | Brother of brother of Abd-al-Mahdi al-Mutayiri. From Sadr City. |
| **SHEIKH 'ABBAS AL-RUBAY'I (CHANGED NAME LATER TO 'ABBAS SHAMS AL-DIN** | Responsible for choosing Sadrist electoral candidates. Editor of Sadrist newspaper al-Hawza. Changed affiliation to Da'wa Party. | Hawza, Najaf. | Personal secretary to Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. Regarded as intellectual force in Sadr movement.Side-lined by Muqtada for publishing critical articles in al-Hawza. |
| **ZAYDAN KATHIR** | Head of Economic Committee (OMS) | Non-hawza. Businessman from prominent Shi'a merchant family. | Successful merchant family from Saddam era. |
| **SHEIKH 'ALI SMEISM** | Responsible for Marqad al-Shaheed Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr. Teaches theology at al-Kufa University. | Hawza, Najaf | Negotiated exit of Muqtada from Najaf following fighting with CF. |
| **SHEIKH SADEQ AL-HASNAWI** | Muqtada' Shura Council | Hawza, Najaf. | Involved in dialogues with civil trend from 2015. |
| **SHIEKH 'ABD AL-RAZZAQ AL-NADDAWI** | Head of Cultural Committee (OMS) | Hawza, Najaf. | |

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| **ALI AL-KHARSAN** | Cultural Committee (OMS) | | Responsible for teaching culture to JAM. |
| **'ABD AL-JABAR AL-HIDJAMI** | Media relations, Muqtada's Private Office (OMS Najaf). Head of the Sadrist Foundation on interim basis. | Non-hawza. | |
| **ABU MUHAMMAD TAMHID AL-SA'IDI** | Held senior positions in Sadrist cultural institutions including the Sadrist Foundation. | Non-hawza. | |
| **DHIA AL-ASADI** | Political Committee (OMS). MP and head of Sadrist bloc in parliament after Nassar al-Ruba'i. | Non-hawza. Studied English literature at University of Basra. | |
| **DR LAQA AL-YASIN** | MP in the Sadrist Ahrar bloc. | | Daughter of Baqir al-Sadr. |
| **ALA' AL-BAGHDADI** | Deputy editor of Sadrist newspaper. Deputy to 'Abd al-Jabar al-Hidjami. | Non-hawza. Journalist. | |
| **ASAD AL-BASRI** | Basra OMS. | Hawza student, Najaf | Involved in educational and indoctrination efforts for JAM. Involved in coordinating JAM resistance to British forces in Basra. |
| **SHEIKH JASIM SA'DI** | Senior Sadr movement cleric until side-lined by Muqtada. | Hawza, Najaf. | |
| **SHEIKH 'AWS AL-KHAFAJI** | Sadr movement cleric. Khatib al-juma' in Nasiriyah | Hawza, Najaf. | Had political ambitions to become Governor of Nasiriyah. |

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| **ABU MUHAMMAD SHIBL, AKA SHIBL AL-ZAIDI.** | Commander in Chief JAM 2003-2004. | Non-hawza. No known operational background in jihadi or clandestine operations prior to involvement in JAM. | Expelled from Sadr movement by Muqtada in 2005 for poor performance of JAM during Battle of Najaf in August 2004. Later founded Kata'ib al-Imam 'Ali. |
| **'ABBAS AL-KUFI** | Commander in Chief JAM post-Khaza'li. Founded Saraya al-Dahabaya "Golden Companies" within JAM (mid-2006). | Non-hawza. Electrician by trade prior to involvement in JAM. No prior military or clandestine operations experience. | "Golden Companies" within JAM was supposed to be internal intelligence and disciplining for JAM. |
| **'ALA AL-LAMI** | Military Committee (OMS), Worked directly for 'Abbas al-Kufi. | Hawza, Najaf. | |
| **MUHAMMAD KARIM MAHUD** | Politician and paramilitary leader. Worked with Akram al-Ka'bi and Abu Sajjad al-Gharawi on weapons smuggling for JAM through al-'Amarah. Became leader of Iraqi Hezbollah. | Non-hawza. Background in clandestine operations during the Saddam era. | Prominent Iraqi political figure associated with Sadr II. Fled to Iran during Iran-Iraq war. Returned to Iraq with Abu Sajjad al-Gharawi and a letter of endorsement from Ayatollah al-Ha'iri. |
| **ABU SAJJAD AL-GHARAWI** | Headed weapons smuggling for JAM after Battle of Najaf. JAM liaison with Iran on weapons transfers. Later made Ishraf of JAM. | Non-hawza. Background in clandestine operations. Considerable experience conducting cross-border operations against Saddam's regime, mainly in the marshlands of southern Iraq. | Close to Akram al-Ka'bi. Came to Iraq with Karim Mahud and used his influence to integrate into JAM. Not considered fully a Sadrist by many. |
| **ISMA'IL HAFIZ AL-LAMI, AKA ABU DURA** | Commander in JAM. Split from Muqtada after 2nd Battle of Najaf in 2004. | Non-hawza. No operational background in jihadi or clandestine operations prior to involvement in JAM. | Abu Dura's militia came to be known as one of the more violent and dangerous groups involved in sectarian violence in Baghdad during the civil war. Sheikh Riyad al-Nouri publicly disavowed Abu Dura on behalf of the Sadr movement in August 2006. |
| **ABU DO'AA (KAZEM AL-ISSAWI)** | Commander in Chief JAM. | | Appointed after Akram al-Ka'bi removal in May 2007. Expelled unexpectedly by Muqtada in 2019. |

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| **AHMED AL-FARTOUSI** | JAM Commander, Basra | | Fartousi directed numerous attacks on British forces in Basra between 2004 and 2005. Split from Muqtada. Arrested by British forces in September 2005. |
| **ABU HAYDAR** | OMS.<br><br>One of the first JAM commanders. | | |
| **ABU MUSTAFA** | Commander, JAM, Baghdad. | | |
| **'ALA KHAWAJA** | Commander, KAM, Sadr City | Non-hawza. | |

# Appendix II
# Sairoun Political Manifesto

*Author's translation from original Arabic:*

**The Programme of the Sairoun Alliance, list number 156**

The programme of the Sairoun Alliance, which is a national project that transcends sectarianism and opposes it, is to achieve the goals set out in the programme according to the mechanisms specified by its internal regulations. These goals represent, fundamentally, salvation [of Iraq] from the regime of sectarian and political quotas, the strengthening of the civil and democratic character of the state, and the formation of a nationalist parliament whose members benefit from integrity and competency so that the reputation of the parliament can be restored in the estimation of the people and it can have the opportunity to carry out its oversight role effectively. Similarly, [these goals] represent the achievement of social justice and the combatting of corruption, to promote peace and security, the successful completion of the reconstruction process, and to ensure the rights and freedoms of citizens and their honourable living.

Sairoun is an alliance of a new kind, one that emerged from the heart of society and from the popular protest movement, where forms of cooperation and coordination developed between our nationalist people participating the movement from different sections [of society]. Important tasks stand in front of the Sairoun alliance in the fields of politics, security, economy, social and cultural affairs and the media.

**Firstly: reform and building the state, Sairoun will work to:**

1. Establish a civil state [*dawla madaniyya*] on the basis of citizenship, securing social justice and a state with strong institutions capable of taking independent decisions reflecting its prestige and the national sovereignty of the country, and concern for the integrity and unity of its territory and establishing Arab, regional and international relations based on common interests and non-interference in internal affairs and mutual respect for sovereignty and independence of each state.

   In the drawing up and implementation of its public policies, this state will depend on the competencies (nationalist and honest) of professionals and technocrats working faithfully in the service of the people and the nation, through implementing the programme of change and reform far from the discrimination of the quota system.
2. Put forward a counter-terrorism strategy and counter extremism, based on an integrated system of political, security, economic, social, cultural and media measures aimed at draining the financial, political and intellectual sources of terrorism and extending the influence of the state.
3. Achieve national unity on the basis of a united, federal Iraq with all its different elements and strata, ensuring the rights of all on the basis of the constitution and the rule of law and institutions and political pluralism and the peaceful transfer of power.
4. Achieve community reconciliation and civil peace.
5. Resolve the current problems between the Kurdistan region and the federal government on the basis of the constitution and in accordance with strengthening national unity.
6. Ensure the legitimate rights of minorities according to the constitution, including freedom of religious belief, and the full participation of minorities in political and social life.

7. Bring forward legislation which includes necessary reforms in various areas to guarantee revision, and scrutiny and amendment of the constitution, especially with respect to some vague and controversial paragraphs, to strengthen the democratic and federal structure of the state.
8. Reform of the electoral system to ensure the electoral process is carried out in a free and fair organised way. Amending the electoral law to allow for broad participation without discrimination between citizens.
9. Ensure improvement in the administration of the state and the spending of public funds. Provide equal opportunities for all citizens to enjoy constitutional rights, duties and freedoms.
10. The independence of the judiciary and activating the role of public prosecution.
11. In the sphere of state administration, emphasis is placed on the adoption of standards of competency and integrity, the application of the Civil Service Law, achieving administrative reform, combating bureaucracy and red tape, and the adoption of electronic governance.

**Secondly: social justice**

The priority for Sairoun is defending the interests, rights and freedom of the people, especially the poor and the toilers, and securing for them a dignified standard of living. [Sairoun will] review legislation connected to wages, salaries and privileges in order to reduce the income gap, adopting a just tax system, secure basic services at minimum cost, and strengthen the ration cards.

In order to achieve these goals the Sairoun alliance will:

1. Legislate to unify the salaries and privileges of the three presidents and ministers in line with their counterparts in the civil service.
2. Reduce the number of security protection allocated to the three heads of state, ministers and members of parliament and have these secured via the ministries of interior and defence.
3. Activate the Social Securities law to contribute in achieving a larger amount of social justice. Strengthen the existing social welfare network and develop it to include establishing funds to provide unemployment and disability benefits resulting from work and old age. Finding an effective system for funding these, as well as providing social security for retirees and senior citizens, housewives, widows and orphans, and with special attention to the families of martyrs and wounded.
4. Ensure the rights of women and widening their participation in economic, social and political life. Bringing forward policies and an economic, social and legislative programme aimed at raising the reality of young people from all walks of life, and widening their participation in political and economic life and creating a safe environment to accommodate their energies and development.
5. Enact laws and legislation that deal with the rights of children and aim to protect children and their upbringing and provide appropriate conditions to develop their abilities and talents and protect them from violence. Prevent child labour and prohibit all forms of exploitation and contravention of their rights.
6. Protection of human rights and civil freedoms: freedom of thought, belief and expression, freedom of the press, freedom of political, professional and trade union work, freedom of protest and all forms of peaceful demonstration. Emphasise the application of the constitution in the field of rights, freedoms and procedures for accountability for human rights violations.
7. Support for civil society organisations and to create ways to involve them in addressing the issues of citizens and finding solutions to their problems, and the problems of the country in general.

**Thirdly: Combating corruption**

Sairoun aims to bring forward an effective strategy for combating corruption, by:

1. Adopting a set of legislative, implementation and oversight measures in accordance with mechanisms ensuring transparency and freedom of information, and by placing the appropriate person in the appropriate place.
2. Activate the legal cases against the biggest corrupt personalities, ensuring that all the accused in the corruption face justice, and ensuring the principle of no impunity.
3. To work on recovering the looted funds taken outside the country based on legal regulations of the United Nations.
4. Legislate the Graft Law and denying those convicted of corruption from candidacy for public office.
5. Support and develop specific institutions for combating corruption and ensuring competent and independent administration with integrity in its leadership.
6. Review the situation of the state's real estate holdings that have been acquired by influential individuals and their parties and restoring those that were acquired illegally.

**Fourthly: Basic services, the Sairoun alliance seeks to:**

1. Raise the level of basic social services, especially health and education and defend free access to these services. To provide public services and ensure the necessary resources for implementing water, electricity, transport, housing and communications projects and municipal services projects.
2. Ensure the return of displaced persons to their cities and reconstruction of liberated territory which still lacks basic and fundamental services. Allocating the necessary funds for this reconstruction without prejudicing the demographic character.

In the field of education, Sairoun seeks to:

3. Address the problems of infrastructure by creating new schools.
4. Pay attention to education as a free service by enacting a special law for this purpose.
5. Detail and renew the school curriculum.
6. Improve the working conditions of teachers and provide necessary support and protection for them so they can improve the performance of their noble profession.
7. Train teachers to keep up with modern developments.
8. Develop and implement literacy plans and address dropouts in education.
9. Revaluate private education and ensure that private education institutions adhere to the law and regulations that deal with this relationship.
10. Issue a new law for student discipline that agrees with the current stage.
11. Create opportunities for graduate employment.

In the area of health, Sairoun will work to:

12. Build a network of health guarantees of a social nature by providing free health care to citizens, preventive and curative, and upgrading the level of health services, expanding the network of hospitals and government clinics in urban, rural and remote areas, and equipping them with the latest medical therapeutic and diagnostic devices.

In the area of housing, Sairoun will seek to:

13. Solve this problem and excesses in this area by ensuring the rights and needs of citizens by assuming the responsibility of the state to secure appropriate housing and health to people with limited incomes and the rest of the citizens in need, according to a comprehensive national action plan to address the housing crisis.

14. The State shall assist cooperative societies and industrial and trade union institutions in building housing for their employees.
15. Strengthen the role of the Real Estate Bank and the Housing Fund and the role of specialized banks concerned with financing private housing.

**Fifthly: Socio-economic issues:**

Sairoun thinks that it is not possible talk about economic development and growth without developing physical, social and cultural infrastructure, and seeking to secure the proper funding is allocated for this purpose. To achieve the Sairoun will work to:

1. Establish a development fund and administer it in the right way.
2. Improve the use of soft loans recently granted to Iraq.
3. Support the private sector and strengthen banks specifically for industry and agriculture.
4. Adopt a rational oil law and enshrine a proper law for oil and gas. Reduce the dependence of the economy on oil, and re-establish the National Oil Company to take over administration and oversight of the process of exploration, extractions and development in oil and gas fields. Take an interest in petrochemical production and refining industries, linking oil resources to sustainable development, industrialization and modernization of agriculture.
5. Support the development of sectors for industry, agriculture and productive services to broaden the bases of the national economy. Bring forward a comprehensive and studied plan for the process of investment in these sectors and productive services.
6. Complete the stalled projects, which number about 6,000 projects, and monitor the appropriate allocations according to priority.
7. Develop coordination mechanisms between the financial and monetary policy in order to strengthen the process of economic development. Strive to raise the real value of the Iraqi dinar, in order to enable the Iraqi citizen to meet necessary needs while curbing inflation rates and working to stabilize them.
8. Reconsider the import and savings policy and deal with the negative repercussions in this domain, reconsider the policy of imbalanced spending.
9. Similarly, to look again at the constitutional violations that occur in the annual budget, by confirming not to pass these budgets unless they are accompanied by a final statement of accounts.
10. Fight financial speculation that is taking place in the banking system through private banks and unlicensed companies, and activating the role of the Central Bank of Iraq in tightening control over banks and companies.
11. Create financial and legal conditions to attract competencies from Iraqis abroad in a number of specialisms.
12. Pay more attention to the Iraqi countryside, modernising agriculture, land reclamation, encouraging farmers to take care of their land and increasing its productivity to achieve food security for society. [This will be achieved] by financing via soft loans and ensuring a fair price for agricultural producers as well as protecting local produce via legislating to impose duties on imported competition in agricultural crops, and rationalizing imports. Also be taking an interest in the manufacturing of agricultural products, rehabilitation of agricultural production plants and factories and companies in the industrial sector.
13. Deal with unemployment as a priority for economic policy, especially amongst graduates. Ensure the right of work to all citizens without favouritism or mediation on the basis of belonging to political party or sect and according to Civil Service Law.

Sairoun defends Iraq's water rights via negotiation with neighbouring states and by making recourse to international regulations on this matter and working on stopping water waste and using modern techniques in irrigation and initiating and completing of desalination projects.

In the area of culture, Sairoun seeks to:

1. Allocate one percent of the annual state budget to culture.
2. Ensure the rights of intellectuals [*al-muthaqafin*], creative freedom and freedom of thought in cultural production.
3. The state will provide support for cultural associations and organisations for the practice of their activities.
4. Support the demand for establishing a high council for culture, literature, and arts.

In the area of sport, Sairoun will seek to:

1. Rebuild the sports sector and legislate for sports clubs and associations and the Olympic Committee.
2. Develop infrastructure and prepare the administrative leadership specialised in sport.
3. Pay attention to sports pioneers and heroes, and a plan to train and develop young athletes.

**Sixth: the armed forces**

The Sairoun alliance will seek to build the armed forces on the basis of professionalism, competence and loyalty to the people and the nation. It will work to develop the competencies of the armed forces, and to limit armaments outside the framework of the security organs [of the state].

We in the Sairoun alliance much persistent work awaiting us to achieve the lofty goals of our alliance. We are determined to work together with sincere efforts to fulfil the commitments of our alliance to the citizens and voters such that Sairoun is name recognised for action and hope in order to establish a civil democratic state which puts the country on the path to realising security, stability and prosperity and initiating sustainable development and realising genuine progress and social justice.